ゼロの使い魔
ヤマグチノボル
MF文庫J

Novel Illustrations

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メディアファクトリー

ゼロの使い魔

「あんた誰？」――才人が目を覚ますと、可愛い女の子が才人を覗きこんでいた。見回すとあたりは見知らぬ場所で、魔法使いみたいな格好をしたやつらが、才人と女の子を取り囲んでいた。その女の子・ルイズが才人を使い魔として別の世界へ「召喚」したらしい。訳がわからず面くらう才人に、ルイズは契約だと言って、いきなりキスしてきた。俺のファーストキス！　と怒る間もなく、手の甲にヘンな文字が浮かび、才人は使い魔にされてしまう。仕方なく、ルイズとともに暮らしながら、元の世界に戻る方法を探すことにした才人だが……。才人の使い魔生活コメディ！

ヤマグチノボル（やまぐち・のぼる）

1972年2月、茨城県生まれ。『カナリア～この想いを歌にのせて』（角川スニーカー文庫）でデヴュー。著書に『グリーングリーン鐘ノ音ファンタスティック』『つっぱれ有栖川』（共に角川スニーカー文庫）『グリングリーン鐘ノ音スタンド・バイ・ミー』（MF文庫J）など多数。小説連載も数多く手がけている（富士見ファンタジアバトルロイヤル等）。『グリーングリーン』『Gonna Be??』『ゆきうた』『私立アキハバラ学園』『魔界天使ジブリール』等など、ゲームシナリオライターとしても活躍中。

Illustration

◎**兎塚エイジ**（うさつか・えいじ）

大阪出身、大阪在住の大阪人。8月16日生まれ。
現在、サラリーマンをしながらイラストを描かせて頂いてます。
今までの参加作品は「道士さまといっしょ」（電撃文庫）です。

カバーイラスト／兎塚エイジ　装丁／blue

ゼロの使い魔

ヤマグチノボル

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＊ギーシュ
トリステイン魔法学院の生徒のひとり。
キザで、才人のことをバカにしている。
二つ名は「青銅のギーシュ」。
＊キュルケ
その美貌とプロポーションで
学院の男子の心を掴んでいる。
ルイズとは昔から仲が悪い。
二つ名は「微熱のキュルケ」。
＊平賀才人（サイト）
ルイズによって「召喚」され、
使い魔にされてしまった高校生。
好奇心が強く、負けん気が強い。
＊ルイズ
才人の「ご主人様」。
有名な貴族の家に生まれたお嬢様だが、
魔法は失敗してばかりのおちこぼれ。
二つ名は「ゼロのルイズ」。
＊オールド・オスマン
トリステイン魔法学院の校長。
偉大な魔法使いだが、
普段はネズミを使ってノゾキをたしなんでいる。
＊タバサ
小柄で幼い外見だが、魔法を操るのは得意。
キュルケとは友人同士。
二つ名は「雪風のタバサ」。
＊ミス・ロングビル
オスマンの秘書をしている、
物静かな女性。
魔法もかなり使えるらしい。

ゼロの使い魔

ヤマグチノボル

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Insert & Back Cover

Insert

Written by Yamaguchi Noboru

Born in February, 1972. His debut work was "Canary/This thought on a Song", which was serialized in *Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko*. Other works include "Green Green kane no oto Fantastic," "Tsuppare Arisugawa" (both in *Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko*), "Green Green kane no oto Stand By Me" (in *MF bunko J*), and many other serialized novels, including "Fujimi Fantagia Battle Royal," "Green Green," "Gonna Be??" "Yukiuta," "Shiritsu Akihabara Gakuen," and "Makai tenshi Gibliel". He has also worked as a scenario writer for games.

Illustrations by Usatsuka Eiji

A real Osaka native, born and raised. His birthday is the 16th of August.

He is currently drawing illustrations while employed as an office worker. Usatsuka has worked on one previous novel, titled "Doushi sama to issho" (serialized in *Dengeki bunko*).

Back Cover

Zero no Tsukaima by Yamaguchi Noboru

"Who are you?"

Hiraga Saito awoke to find a pretty girl asking him that question. Looking around, he found himself in an unfamiliar place, people dressed as magicians surrounding him and the girl.

The girl, calling herself Louise, explained that she had "summoned" him from his world to be her "familiar". Saito's confusion grew, especially after she kissed him and claimed it was a "contract"! *My first kiss*, he lamented, but before he had even a chance to become angry, strange symbols etched themselves into his left hand, marking him as a familiar!

While searching for a way to return home, Saito must cope with being forced to live with Louise, as her familiar...

And so begins Hiraga Saito's comedic life as 'Zero's Familiar.'

Kingdom of Magic

Chapter One: I'm a Familiar

"Who are you?" asked the girl intently. She was examining Saito's face. The sky was a clear blue behind her.

She seemed to be close to Saito's age. Underneath a black cloak, she wore a white blouse and a gray pleated skirt. She knelt down and looked, shocked, at his face.

Her face is... cute. Reddish-brown eyes danced upon the stage of her flawless, white skin and strawberry blonde hair. *She looks kind of like a foreigner.* In fact, the girl *must* have been a foreigner. A cute, doll-like foreigner. *Maybe she's half-Japanese?*

Still, that's some kind of weird school uniform she's wearing isn't it? I don't recognize it.

Saito was lying on the ground, face up, though he was unsure of how he had got there. He raised his head to take a look around. A crowd of people in black cloaks were curiously examining him. In the distance, on an endlessly rich grassy plain, he saw a huge castle with stone walls, just like the ones in those European tour photographs.

It's just like a fantasy.

My head is killing me. Giving his head a shake, he answered, "Who am I...? I'm Hiraga Saito."

"Where are you from, commoner?"

Commoner? What does she mean by that? Everyone around him had some sort of stick in their hand and wore the same uniform as that girl's. *Did I wander into an American school or something?*

"Louise, what were you thinking, calling a commoner with 'Summon Servant'?"

someone asked, and everyone but the girl who was looking at his face started to laugh.

"I... I just made a little mistake!" The girl in front of Saito shouted in a refined voice that carried like a bell.

"What mistake are you talking about? Nothing unusual happened."

"Of course! After all, she's Louise the Zero!" someone else said, and the crowd burst into laughter again.

It appeared the girl looking into Saito's face was named Louise.

Either way, this is no American school. You won't see those kinds of buildings just anywhere.

Could it be a movie set? Are they filming something? But then Saito thought all of a sudden. *But it's too big to be a movie set. Could this kind of scenery really exist somewhere in Japan? Maybe it's a new theme park? But then why was I sleeping here?*

"Mr. Colbert!" The girl, Louise, shouted.

The crowd parted, revealing a middle-aged man. Saito thought it was funny because the man looked ridiculous. He carried a big wooden staff and was covered in a black robe.

What is he playing at? He's dressed like a wizard. Is he even sane? Oh, I've got it, this must be a cosplay gathering. But it doesn't seem to have that kind of atmosphere. Suddenly, Saito was gripped with fear. *What am I going to do if this is a religious sect? It's possible. They could have put me to sleep somehow and brought me here while I was taking a walk in town. That mirror must have been a trap. If not, I have no other explanation for this.*

Saito decided that he ought to stay quiet until he understood what was going on.

The girl named Louise seemed to be in a panic, begging to redo something and gesticulating frantically.

I feel sorry for her, being stuck in this weird religious group, since she's so cute.

"What is it that you want from me, Miss Vallière?"

"Please! Let me try the summoning one more time!"

Summoning? What's that? They mentioned it earlier.

Mr. Colbert, the man wearing the black robe, shook his head. "I cannot allow that, Miss Vallière."

"Why not?"

"It is strictly forbidden. When you are promoted to a second year student, you must summon a familiar, which is what you just did."

A familiar? What's that?

"Your elemental specialty is decided by the familiar that you summon. It enables you to advance to the appropriate courses for that element. You cannot change the familiar once you have summoned it because the 'Springtime Familiar Summoning' is a sacred rite. Whether you like it or not, you have no choice but to take him."

"But... I've never heard of having a commoner as a familiar!"

Everyone around laughed. Louise scowled at them, but the laughter did not stop.

'*Springtime Familiar Summoning'? What's that? I don't understand. What are they talking about? How did I end up in a place like this? It has to be one of those New Religions*[1]*. The safest thing to do is to take the first opportunity to run away. I mean really, where is this place? Was I taken to a foreign country? A kidnapping! I've been kidnapped! I'm in real trouble,* thought Saito.

"This is a tradition, Miss Vallière. I cannot allow any exceptions; he," The middle-aged wizard cosplayer pointed at Saito. "He may be a commoner, but as long as he was summoned by you, he must be your familiar. Never in history has a human been summoned as a familiar, but the Springtime Familiar Summoning takes precedence over every rule. In other words, there is no other way around it; he must become your familiar."

"You have got to be joking..." Louise drooped her shoulders in disappointment.

"Well then, continue with the ceremony."

"With *him*?"

"Yes, with him. Hurry. The next class will begin any minute. How much more time is this summoning going to take? After mistake upon mistake, you have finally managed to summon him. Hurry and form a contract." Everyone voiced their agreement and began jeering.

Louise stared at Saito's face as if troubled.

What is it? What's she going to do to me?

"Hey," Louise addressed Saito.

"Yes?"

"You should count yourself lucky. Normally, you'd go your whole life without a noble doing this to you."

Noble? How stupid. What nobles are you talking about? Aren't you just a bunch of twisted cosplaying new-religion freaks?

Louise closed her eyes with an air of resignation. She waved around the wooden stick in her hand.

"My name is Louise Françoise Le Blanc de La Vallière. Pentagon of the Five Elemental Powers; bless this humble being and make him my familiar."

She chanted those words over and over, like a magic spell, and touched Saito's forehead with the stick. Her lips then slowly drew closer.

What... What are you doing?!

"Just stay still." Louise said, a touch of irritation in her voice. Her face got closer.

"Oi, wait a second. I'm... Well, I'm not... ready for this..."

His face twisted in panic.

"Ah, geez! I told you to stay still!" Louise grabbed Saito's face roughly with her left hand.

"Huh?"

"Mmm..."

Louise's lips touched Saito's.

What is happening?! What kind of contract is this?! The touch of her soft lips confounded Saito even more. *My first kiss! Stolen in this weird place by this weird girl whose motives I don't understand!* Saito remained frozen, paralyzed.

Louise removed her lips. "It is done."

Her face is all red. Is this idiot embarrassed by her boldness? Saito thought.

"I should be the one embarrassed, not you! It was me who was kissed all of a sudden!"

But Louise ignored Saito completely.

You kissed me and now dismiss me? If this isn't rude, I don't know what is. Really, who are they?! I'm scared. I want to go home right this minute. I just want to go home and go on the computer. Saito thought. He had just registered with a dating site, so he wanted to check his e-mail.

"You have failed 'Summon Servant' many times, but you have managed to succeed with 'Contract Servant' in one try." Colbert said happily.

"It's just because he's only a commoner."

"If he was a powerful magical beast, she wouldn't have been able to make a contract."

Some of the students laughed.

Louise scowled at them. "Don't make fun of me! Even I do things right once in a while!"

"Truly 'once in a while', Louise the Zero." Laughed a girl with gorgeous curly hair and freckles on her face.

"Mr. Colbert! Montmorency The Flood just insulted me!"

"Who are you calling 'The Flood'? I'm Montmorency the Fragrance!"

"I heard that you used to wet the bed like a flood, didn't you? 'The Flood' suits you better!"

"I hadn't expected better manners from Louise the Zero."

"Watch it! Nobles ought to show each other the proper respect." The middle-aged wizard cosplayer interjected.

What are they talking about? What contract? Who are they calling a servant?

Suddenly, Saito's body started to heat up.

"Aaah!" Saito stood up. "I'm burning up!"

"It will be over soon; just wait. The Familiar's Runes are being inscribed." Louise said, irritated.

"Stop it! What are you doing to me?!"

There is nothing I can do, but I can't just lie around quietly. It is unbelievably hot!

"By the way."

"What?"

"Why do you allow yourself, a commoner, to use that kind of language in front of nobles?"

The burning sensation lasted only for a second. His body rapidly cooled down.

"That was quick..." The middle-aged cosplay wizard, known as Colbert, approached the kneeling Saito and checked the back of his left hand. There, jumping out at him, were unfamiliar letters.

Are those runes? It looks like a wriggling snake in some strange pattern. Saito stared at it and thought, *If this isn't a trick, then what is it?*

"Hmmm... These are very unusual Runes," said the middle-aged wizard

impersonator.

At this point, Saito suddenly lost it. "Who are you people?!" he yelled out, but no one reacted.

"Well, let's go back to class, everyone."

The middle-aged cosplay wizard turned on his heel, then rose gently into the air. Saito gaped after him. *Is... Is he really flying? Is he floating in the air? Unbelievable!* The other people who looked like students also floated up.

It can't be! The whole lot of them? One person could rise up into the air by some trick, but so many? Saito looked for wires or even a crane, but the surrounding area was just a large grassy plain. There was nothing to suggest that any tricks or setups were used.

Everyone who was floating quietly moved towards the stone walls of the castle in the distance.

"Louise, you'd better *walk* back!"

"She shouldn't try to fly. She can't even manage levitation."

"A commoner is perfect as your familiar!" the students jeered as they flew away.

The only ones left behind were Saito and the girl named Louise.

As soon as it was only the two of them, Louise took a deep breath, turned toward Saito, and yelled, "Who are you?!"

That made Saito mad. *That's my line!* he thought.

"Who are *you*? Where *is* this place?! *Who* were all those people?! Why can they *fly*?! What did you *do* to my body?!"

"I don't know what backwoods you came from, but all right, I will explain it to you."

"Backwoods? This is the backwoods! Tokyo is nothing like this!"

"Tokyo? What is that? What country is it in?"

"Japan."

"Never heard of it."

"Oh please! But why are they flying?! You saw it too! They flew! They all did!"

But Louise took no notice of it at all, as if to say, "What's wrong with flying?"

"Of course they flew. What would we do if mages couldn't fly?"

Saito grabbed Louise's shoulders and yelled, "Mages? Where the hell am I?!"

"This is Tristain! And this is the renowned Tristain Academy of Magic!"

"Academy of Magic?"

"I'm a second year student, Louise de La Vallière. I am your master from now on. Remember that!"

All of Saito's fire suddenly disappeared. He was starting to get a really bad feeling about the situation. "Uh... Miss Louise..."

"What?"

"Did you really summon me here?"

"That's what I've been telling you over and over again. I can't believe you're that dense. Why does my familiar have to be so uncool... I wanted to have something wicked like a dragon or a griffin or a manticore. At least an eagle or an owl."

"A dragon or a griffin? Really?"

"Yeah, those would be totally cool familiars."

"Do they actually exist?"

"They do. Why?"

"You've gotta be kidding me," Saito said, laughing. But Louise didn't seem to be joking.

"Well, you've probably never seen them before," Louise said seriously, pity in her voice.

The mages who had flown away and the fantasy words they used suddenly connected.

He felt a chill run down his spine, and broke out in a cold sweat. "Maybe... These people, they really flew, didn't they? Are you really witches and wizards?"

"Of course we are! Now, let go of my shoulders! You shouldn't even be talking to me!"

"A dream... This has to be a dream..." Slowly, his strength left him, and Saito fell to his knees.

"Louise," he said with a weak voice.

"Don't call me directly by name."

"Hit me."

"What did you say?"

"Please, hit me in the head as hard as you can."

"Why?"

"I want to wake up from this dream. I'm gonna wake up and go on the computer. Tonight's dinner is hamburger steak[2]. My mom said so this morning."

"Computer?"

"No, it's nothing. After all, you're just a part of my dream, so you don't need to worry about it. Now just let me escape this dream already."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but you want me to hit you, right?" Louise clenched her hands into fists.

"Yes, please."

Her fists began to tremble. Louise's expression became unreadable, but it seemed

a lot of thoughts were going through her head. "Aren't you concerned at all about being summoned?"

"How should I know?"

"How could I, the third daughter of the Vallière family... a noble who takes pride in her proper pedigree and ancient lineage, end up having to make someone like you my familiar?"

"How should I know?" Saito repeated.

"...And just who decided that the contract had to be sealed by a kiss?"

"How should I know? Look, will you just get it over and done with? I hate nightmares."

"Nightmares? That's my line!" Louise clobbered Saito in the head with all her strength. "That was my first kiss!"

Perhaps she was a bit too forceful... "Mine too," thought Saito, losing consciousness.

* * *

Hiraga Saito. Seventeen years of age and in his second year of high school.

Athletic ability: normal. Grades: average. Duration without a girlfriend: seventeen years. Overall: no positives or negatives.

Teachers' evaluation: "Ah, Hiraga-kun. He refuses to give up, and he has a strong sense of curiosity, but he's a little slow."

Parents' evaluation: "You should study more. You're on the slow side."

Being slow, he was rarely bothered by accidents, and accepted pretty much anything — relative to most people, at least. Earlier, when he saw people flying, he made a commotion, but given that an ordinary person would have been so

shocked as to be brought to their knees, he owed much to his disposition.

To put it plainly, he just didn't think too deeply about things before acting.

Also, he had a fiercely competitive spirit. In that sense, he might have been quite similar to Louise in personality.

Anyway, a mere thirty minutes ago, Saito had been walking down a street in Tokyo, Japan; on Earth.

He was on his way home after having his notebook computer repaired. He was quite happy, in fact, since he could go on the internet once more. He'd recently registered at an online dating site and had a chance to finally find himself a girlfriend.

Though what he really wanted was something to spice up his otherwise monotonous daily life. However, instead of discovering it on the internet, he found it in the middle of the street.

He was walking past the train station on his way home when suddenly a shining mirror-like object appeared in front of him. Saito stopped to take a good long look at it. Remember, his curiosity was about twice that of a normal person.

It was a large ellipse, about two meters high and one meter wide, with no substantial thickness. Then he noticed it was actually floating a little above the ground.

This piqued his interest. "What kind of natural phenomenon is this?" he wondered, scrutinizing the sparkling mirror-like object. "This is beyond odd, I've never seen or heard of any kind of phenomenon like this." He considered sidestepping it, but his curiosity got the better of him. He wanted to see if he could walk through it.

No, maybe I shouldn't, he told himself. *But it's just a couple of steps,* he reasoned. He really did have a hopeless personality.

But first, he picked up a pebble and threw it experimentally at the disk. The pebble disappeared into the middle of the mirror-like object.

Oho, he thought. When he checked the other side, the pebble was nowhere to be

seen. Next he pulled his house key out of his pocket. He poked the mirror-like object with the tip of the key.

Nothing happened.

Withdrawing the key, he examined it, but nothing about it had changed. Saito judged that there wouldn't be any immediate danger if he walked through, which only tempted him further to do it.

In the end, even though he knew he shouldn't, he stepped forward. It was much like opening up a manga just after deciding you were going to do nothing but study from now on.

He immediately regretted it, as an intense shock assailed his senses. He suddenly remembered back to when he was a child, when his mother had bought him a strange machine that supposedly made a person smarter by running an electric current through their body. It felt a lot like that. Saito fainted.

When he opened his eyes...

He was in a strange world as if out of a fantasy book.

* * *

"Is that true?" asked Louise, looking at Saito with an expression of disbelief. In her hand, she held bread from tonight's dinner.

They were in Louise's room. It looked about 12 tatami mats[3] in size. If you treated the window as south, the bed would be situated on the west side, the door would be to the north, and a big wardrobe would stand to the east. All the furniture looked like valuable antiques. Louise had brought Saito here once he had regained consciousness.

Saito, trying to ignore the ache from the blow earlier, answered her, "So what if it wasn't?"

Saito had never felt the slightest bit resentful of his own curiosity until today. *I*

never should've walked through that stupid thing... This isn't Japan. It isn't even Earth.

If there were a nation with wizards who flew through the sky, even only a few, he certainly hadn't learned about it in middle school geography. And even if there were, what about those huge moons floating in the sky? They were easily twice the size of Earth's. Their huge size was not the issue; it was entirely possible that in some countries there were nights like that. However, that there were two of them was strange. Could the moon have multiplied into two without Saito noticing?

No. It couldn't. In other words, this was definitely not Earth.

It was dark now... Night had already fallen. *I guess my family is worrying about me right now,* he concluded sadly.

From the window, he could see the grassy plains where he'd been lying. Across the plains, illuminated by moonlight, he could also see a tall mountain range. Over to his right was a vast expanse of dense forest. Saito let out a sigh.

Evergreen forests like this one simply should not exist. It's totally different from what you'd see in Japan.

The castle and the grounds he had passed on his way looked very much like something directly out of the Middle Ages. It had been a breathtaking spectacle that would've amazed him if he'd come here on a trip.

An entrance arch and a sturdy staircase, both made of stone... This was the Tristain Academy of Magic, Louise had explained. All the Academy students lived in dormitories on the school grounds.

Academy of Magic? Wonderful! Dormitories? Splendid! It's just like a movie!

But this isn't Earth...!

"I can't believe it."

"Look, neither can I."

"By another world, what do you mean?"

"There aren't any magicians. And there's only one moon."

"There's such a world like that?"

"I'm telling you, it's where I came from!" Saito shouted.

"Don't yell at me, you commoner."

"Who are you calling a commoner?!"

"Well, you're not a mage, right? So you're a commoner."

"Why does it matter if I'm a mage or not?"

"Look, do you really know nothing about the world?"

"As I've been telling you all this time, I'm not from this one!"

At that, Louise set her elbows on the table with a troubled look.

On the tabletop was a lamp with an art deco style shade. Its flickering light filled the room with a pale glow. It seemed as if electricity wasn't used.

Jeez, electricity isn't that complicated to set up, is it? I feel like I'm back in the old foreign settler's hut that our family went to ages ago.

Wait, 'setup...' Oh, could it be... This is...

"I've got it."

"What did you get?" Louise asked, looking up.

"This is one of those candid camera programs. It's just a trick everyone is pulling on me, isn't it?"

"What's a 'candid camera'?"

"They stopped airing a while ago after someone got hurt, but you don't have any material so you're resorting back to the same kind of stuff, are you? So where's the camera?"

"What are you talking about?"

Saito sprung upon Louise.

"Kya--! What are you doing?!"

Knocking over a chair, he bore down on her.

"Where's the mike?! Is it here?"

Grabbing her roughly, he started to unbutton her blouse. However, a swift kick to the groin brought that to a halt... This left him on the floor in pain.

"Gaaaaaaaaarrrgh..."

"H-how dare you... To a noble such as me..." Louise stood up, trembling furiously all over.

Through the intense agony, Saito thought, *This is no dream. Plus, this isn't Earth. It's an entirely different world.*

"Please..."

"What?!"

"Send me back home..."

"That's impossible."

"But why...?"

"Because you've been bound by a contract as my familiar; it doesn't matter if you come from the countryside or a completely different world like you've said. Once the bond is established, it can't be undone."

"You gotta be kidding..."

"Look, I don't like this either! Why do I have to be stuck with a familiar like you?!"

"Well then, send me back."

"Are you saying you're really from another world?" asked Louise, seemingly still perplexed.

"Yeah." Saito nodded.

"Show me some proof."

Still wincing at the pain, Saito stood up and opened his bag.

"What's that?"

"A notebook computer," replied Saito.

The surface of the recently repaired notebook gleamed with reflected light.

"I've certainly never seen anything like this. What kind of magic artifact is it?"

"It's not magic. It's science."

Saito pushed the power button, and the computer whirred to life.

"Uwah! What is that?!" Louise gave a surprised yelp as the screen flickered on.

"The notebook screen."

"It's pretty... What element of magic does it use? Wind? Water?"

"Science."

Louise stared at Saito blankly. Clearly she didn't get it. "So, what kind of element is this 'science'? Is it different from the four elemental powers?"

"Argh, that's enough! I told you, it's not magic!" Saito waved his hands around wildly.

Louise sat on the edge of her bed and dangled her feet. Then, shrugging, she said with a dispassionate look, "Hmm. But I don't really understand it..."

"Why? Is there anything like this in this world too?"

Louise pouted. "No, but..."

"Then just believe me! There's nothing to understand!"

Clutching her long hair, Louise just shook her head. "All right! I'll believe you!"

"Really?"

Crossing her arms and cocking her head, Louise gave an annoyed growl. "Only because you would've gone on about it if I didn't say so."

"Well, it doesn't matter, as long as you've got it. Now, send me back."

"I told you, it's impossible."

"But why?!"

Louise's face was etched with discomfort as she answered Saito. "That's because there's no spell that can connect this world to your world."

"Then how did I end up here?"

"I wish I knew!"

Saito and Louise glared at each other.

"Listen, I'm being completely honest when I say there's no such spell. Nobody's even heard of another world."

"There obviously is one if I'm here!"

"'Summon Servant' is used to call living beings from within Halkeginia. Normally, only animals or magical beasts are summoned. This is actually the first instance that I've seen it work on a person."

"Stop talking about it like you're not involved. In that case, cast that spell on me one more time."

"Why?"

"It might return me to my world."

Looking discernibly perplexed, Louise tilted her head to one side.

"...That won't work. 'Summon Servant' is a strictly one-way spell. No incantation of any kind exists to return a summoned familiar back to where it was brought from."

"Whatever, just try it."

"It's impossible. And I can't even cast it now."

"What? Why?"

"...Using 'Summon Servant' again is..."

"Yeah?"

"...Completely ineffective unless the familiar you first summoned has died."

"Say what?" Saito froze.

"Would you like to die?"

"Err... Guess I'll pass." He hung his head. His eyes trailed down to the runes that had been inscribed on his left hand.

"Do you want to know what that is?"

"Yeah."

"That's like a stamp that says you're my familiar."

Louise stood up and crossed her arms. This close, she was actually quite cute. Slender and well-proportioned legs, thin ankles. Not very tall, at around 155 cm. Her eyes were like a curious kitten's, and her eyebrows traced a subtle line over them.

If Saito had met her through the message boards of a dating site, he would've hopped and leaped for joy. But alas, this wasn't Earth. No matter how much he wanted to go back, he couldn't. Saito choked up at this thought, and his shoulders sagged.

"...Yeah, all right. For now, I guess I'm really your familiar."

"Come again?"

"What, you got a problem with that?"

"I see you're still not used to formal speech. It should be, 'Is there something you wish to address, master?'" corrected Louise, one finger raised as if lecturing. The gesture was cute, but the tone was quite strict.

"But, um, what exactly does a familiar do?" asked Saito. Of course, he had seen ravens and owls appear as familiars in anime involving magicians. But mostly they would just sit on their master's shoulder and do nothing particularly relevant.

"Firstly, a familiar is able to grant its master an enhancement in vision and hearing."

"Like how?"

"That means what the familiar sees, the master can also see."

"Oh."

"But it seems that doesn't work with you. I can't see anything."

"Yeah, but it's not like that matters," Saito said off-handedly.

"Also, a familiar will retrieve items that its master desires. For instance, reagents."

"Reagents?"

"They're catalysts used when casting certain spells. Something like sulfur, or moss..."

"Uh-huh..."

"But you won't ever find me stuff like that, will you? Considering you don't even know what kind of reagents there are."

"Nope."

Louise frowned irritably, but continued talking. "And this is most important of all... A familiar exists to protect its master! The task of protecting them from any and all enemies is a duty of the highest priority! But that might be a little bit problematic for you..."

"Since I'm human..."

"...A powerful magical beast would almost always defeat its enemies, but I don't think you could even beat a raven."

"Shut up."

"That's why I'm only making you do things I'm fairly sure you can do: laundry, cleaning, and other miscellaneous tasks."

"That's offensive. Just you see, I'm sure I'll find a way to get back home!"

"Sure, sure. In fact, I'll be glad if you do. Because when you return to your world, I'll be able to summon a new familiar."

"Why you..."

"Right then, all this talking has made me sleepy," said Louise with a great yawn.

"Where do I sleep?"

Louise pointed to the floor.

"I'm not some dog or cat, you know."

"But there's nowhere else. And there's only one bed." She threw him a blanket.

She then brought her hand up to the top button of her blouse.

One by one, the buttons came undone.

Soon she was down to her underwear. Saito blushed. "Wh-wh-what are you doing?!"

Louise answered as if it was the most obvious thing. "I'm going to sleep, so I'm getting changed."

"Do it somewhere else where I can't see you!"

"Why?"

"Because! It makes the situation awkward! Seriously!"

"It's not awkward at all."

"Is that because you're a mage? You're okay with doing that in plain sight of a guy?"

"A guy? Who? I don't need to think anything of being watched by my familiar."

What the heck. That's exactly how you'd treat a dog or cat. Saito grabbed the blanket, threw it over his head, and turned away. He decided to revoke any and all thoughts he'd previously had about her cuteness. She just really got on his nerves. *Being that girl's familiar? Yeah right.*

"Oh, and these. Wash them for me tomorrow." Several items came flying over to land softly beside him. He picked them up, wondering what they were.

A lacy camisole and matching panties. White, too. *What exquisite and delicate pieces,* Saito thought as his face began to flush. He clenched them tightly as a mix of indignation and delight welled up.

"Why do I have to-- Your underwear?! Wash them?! Frankly, I'm both flattered and offended!"

He bolted upright, without even realizing he'd done so. Louise was pulling a

large nightgown over her head. And in the dim light thrown off by the lamp, he could see the outline of her figure. While he couldn't make out any other details, it didn't seem as though she was embarrassed. It was kind of disappointing. He felt as though his masculinity were being denied.

"Who do you think is going to support you? Who do you think is going to give you food? And just whose room are you going to sleep in?"

"Uhh..."

"You're my familiar, right? Laundry, cleaning, other menial tasks - they're naturally your job."

Saito pulled the blanket over his head again.

This girl is hopeless, he thought. *She just doesn't see me as a guy at all.*

I want to go home. I miss my room. I miss my parents.

The feeling of homesickness was overwhelming.

...When will I be able to go back?

Is there even a way to go back?

I wonder if my family is worried about me right now...

I need to find some way of returning...

What should I do? Should I try running away from here? But then what?

Maybe I'll try asking someone. But from what Louise told me earlier, nobody even knows another world exists, so there's no way they'll believe me.

No, I need to think this through rationally. In any case, struggling won't get me anywhere. I don't have any clues, and even if I escaped from here, there's no guarantee that I'll even find a way back.

I don't even have relatives in this world. There's nobody I can rely on besides a conceited girl by the name of Louise.

Guess there's no choice. For now, I'll be her familiar. At least she said she'll keep me fed. It'll be tough, since I'm not much more than a familiar to her.

Sure, she's a bit arrogant, but at least she's fairly cute. I suppose I can just imagine I made a girlfriend. Someone I happened to meet through the dating site. Treat it as if I came overseas just to see her. Or as if I came as a foreign student. Actually, that's better. Yeah, that's what I'll think. Hah, I'm so simple like that. It's great.

Okay, thought Saito. *It's not like I've been stranded on a deserted island. Moping will achieve nothing.*

I'll live as a familiar, and in the process, I'll look for a way to return home.

Now that his plan was set, he felt noticeably sleepy.

No matter the situation, Saito's amazing adaptability had always saved him. Where anyone else would've panicked and crumbled, Saito came through thanks to his flexible personality.

Louise snapped her fingers, and the glow of the lamp died out.

The lamp is magical too? I guess that means there really is no need for electricity, Saito reasoned.

A shroud of darkness descended upon the room.

Outside the window, the two moons shone down mysteriously.

Mrs. Hiraga, your son Saito has arrived in a world where there are wizards. He will not be able to attend school for quite some time, nor will he be able to study. Please forgive him.

And so began Saito's life as a familiar.

Chapter Two: Louise the Zero

When Saito woke up, the first sight to greet his eyes was the underwear that Louise had stripped off.

It had somehow ended up in his line of sight, having been carelessly tossed away. Louise was still asleep in bed, snoring gently. Her sleeping face was simply cherubic. Now she seemed a lot more childish. She was a loud and annoying girl when she spoke — "noble" this, "magician" that — but, while she slept, she was cute. Saito almost wished that she would stay that way forever.

Then reality sank in. *So, last night really* ***wasn't*** *a dream.* He had thought he would find himself back in his own room, but, obviously, it hadn't happened. He felt dispirited.

Still, it was a refreshing morning. Dazzling light shone down into the room.

Saito's characteristic curiosity was reawakened. *Now that I think about it, this is kinda like a sightseeing tour. I wonder what kind of world this is? While I don't like the idea of being the familiar of a rude magician girl who snores her head off, I should try to make the most of it, in any case.*

First things first, he flung the blanket off Louise.

"Wh-What? What's going on!"

"It's morning, Milady."

"Huh? O-Oh... Wait, who are you!?" Louise yelled in a slurred voice. Her expression was vacant as she trailed off into a pitiful mumble.

Is this girl okay?

"Hiraga Saito."

"Oh, the familiar. That's right, I summoned you yesterday, didn't I?"

Louise got up and yawned. Then, she ordered Saito:

"Clothes."

He tossed her the uniform that had been draped over a chair. Louise began to sluggishly undress.

Saito quickly turned the other way to hide his blushing face.

"Underwear."

"G-Get that yourself."

"They're in the lowest drawer... Of that closet... Over there."

It seemed she thoroughly planned to make the most out of Saito.

Holding his tongue, he went and opened the indicated drawer. Lo and behold, it was packed full of underwear. It was the first time he had seen women's underwear, except for his mother's. Grabbing a pair at random, he threw it over his shoulder without looking back.

Once Louise had put them on, she mumbled again.

"Clothes."

"I just gave them to you."

"Dress me."

Don't push it. Saito turned to object angrily, only to find Louise sitting sleepily on the bed wearing nothing but the underwear he had thrown at her. He suddenly didn't know where to look.

Louise pouted in displeasure.

"You must not know because you're a commoner, but nobles will not dress themselves if a servant is available."

That irked him.

"You can at least dress yourself."

"Right then. As punishment for being a disrespectful familiar: No breakfast," Louise declared, raising a finger triumphantly.

Reluctantly, Saito picked up her blouse.

* * *

When he left the room with Louise, he saw three identical wooden doors along the wall. One of them opened, and from inside appeared a girl with flaming red hair. She was taller than Louise, roughly the same height as Saito. She gave off a strongly flirtatious aura. Her face was attractive, and she sported a captivating bustline. Her breasts were like melons.

The top two buttons of her blouse were undone, highlighting an impressive cleavage which impulsively drew the eyes in. Her skin was tanned, giving her the look of healthy and natural beauty.

Her height, skin color, bearing, and breast size... It all made for a strong contrast with Louise, who lacked in those charm points.

When she saw Louise, she grinned broadly.

"Good morning, Louise."

Louise returned the greeting with a frown.

"Good morning... Kirche."

"That... is your familiar?" Kirche asked somewhat mockingly, pointing at Saito.

"That's right."

"Ahaha! So it really is a human! That's amazing!"

Saito resented that. *Sorry for being a human. What are you then?* He stared at Kirche's breasts. *You're just a big-breasted alien. Yeah, a big b-b-breasted alien.* His stare intensified.

"It's just like you to summon a commoner with 'Summon Servant.' What else to expect from Louise the Zero?"

Louise's white cheeks flushed scarlet.

"Shut up."

"I summoned a familiar yesterday, too. Unlike a certain somebody, I was successful on my first try."

"Really."

"And, if you're going to have a familiar, it should be a good one, like this. Flame!"

Kirche called her familiar triumphantly. From her room, a large, dark-red lizard slithered out. A wave of heat hit Saito.

"Uwah! What the heck is this red thing?"

Kirche smiled.

"Ohoho! Don't tell me this is your first time seeing a fire lizard?"

"Put a chain on it or something! It's dangerous! And just what is a fire lizard?"

"Don't worry. As long as I order it not to, it won't attack. Aren't you the scaredy-cat."

Kirche put a hand to her chin and tilted her head teasingly.

The creature was at least as big as a tiger. Its tail was tipped with flame, and its mouth emitted sparks and embers.

"Don't you feel hot being near it?" Saito asked. He calmed himself down and looked at it again. "Wow, it's a monster... Fantastic!"

"It's actually fairly cool to me."

"Is that a salamander?" Louise asked jealously.

"That's right! A fire lizard! See, look at the tail. A flame this vivid and large means it's without a doubt a salamander from the Fire Dragon Mountains! It's like a brand! Collectors can't even put a price on these!"

"That's nice," Louise said, her voice bitter.

"Isn't it? It matches my affinity perfectly!"

"Your affinity is Fire, isn't it?"

"Of course. After all, I'm Kirche the Ardent. The ardent of gently smoldering passion. Everywhere I go, I have boys falling for me. Unlike you, right?"

Kirche puffed her chest out proudly. Not wanting to lose, Louise did the same, but the difference in volume was just too striking.

Despite this, Louise glared at Kirche. It looked as if she really hated losing.

"I don't have the time to go around flirting with everything I see, unlike you."

Kirche only smiled calmly. Then, she turned to Saito.

"And what's your name?"

"Hiraga Saito."

"Hiragasaito? What a strange name."

"Hey!"

"Well then, I'll be off now."

She stroked her flaming red hair back and dashed off. The salamander followed her with a cute shuffling movement that looked odd with such a large creature.

As she disappeared, Louise shook a fist in her direction.

"Ooh, that girl gets on my nerves! Just because she summoned a salamander from the Fire Dragon Mountains! Argh!"

"Calm down, it's just a summoning."

"No, it's not! You can determine a mage's true power just by looking at his/her familiar! Why did that idiot get a salamander, while I got you?"

"Jeez, sorry for being a human. But you're one too, y'know."

"Comparing mages and commoners is like comparing wolves and dogs!" Louise exclaimed haughtily.

"...Okay, okay. By the way, she just called you 'Louise the Zero', but, what's the 'Zero' stand for? Is it your surname?"

"No way! My name is Louise de La Vallière! 'Zero' is just a nickname."

"A nickname, huh? I can understand why she's called 'Ardent,' but why are you 'Zero?'"

"You don't need to know," Louise answered uncomfortably.

"Is it your breasts?" Saito asked, glancing at Louise. *Yup. Flat as a board.*

Louise's hand flew out. He dodged it.

"Come back here!"

"Don't hit me!"

A slap?

That reminds me... This girl... Yesterday, even when everyone else flew away, she walked. And, last night, when I grabbed her, she kicked me in the groin.

If she really wanted to chastise me, wouldn't it be better to use magic instead of hitting or kicking me? That would be more effective, and more mage-like. Why is that? Saito wondered.

* * *

The Academy of Magic's dining hall was the tallest and centermost building on the premises. Inside, three extremely long tables were arranged parallel to each other. Each one looked like it could easily seat a hundred people. The table at which Louise and all the second years sat was the middle table.

It appeared that students could be identified by the color of their cloaks. Viewed from the entrance, everyone sitting on the left-hand table looked a little older and wore purple cloaks — third years.

The students sitting on the right-hand table wore brown cloaks — first years. *So they're like year-level jerseys,* Saito thought.

Every single mage on the school grounds, students and teachers alike, gathered here for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

On an upper level, he could see teachers enjoying pleasant chatter.

All the tables were magnificently decorated.

Numerous candles, bunches of flowers, baskets full of fruit...

Saito's mouth was agape with amazement at the sheer grandeur of the dining hall. Louise raised her head imperiously and began to explain. Her hazel eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Tristain's Academy of Magic doesn't teach just magic, you know."

"Right..."

"Almost all mages are nobles. The saying 'nobles achieve nobility through the use of magic' is a foundation for the education we receive as nobles. Thus, our dining halls must also be fitting of a noble's status."

"Okay..."

"Understand? Normally, a commoner like you would never set foot inside the Alvíss[4] Dining Hall. Be grateful."

"Right... Hey, what's an 'Alvíss'?"

"It's the name for the little people. See all those statues over there?"

Where she pointed, lined along the walls were elaborate sculptures of small people.

"They're well-made. Err, those things don't... like... come alive during the night or anything, do they?"

"Oh, you knew that?"

"So they do?!"

"Well, they dance. Enough of this, pull out my chair, will you? You're not a very competent familiar," Louise remarked, crossing her arms and tilting her head, which made her strawberry-blonde hair ripple. *Oh well, ladies first.* Saito pulled Louise's chair out for her.

Louise didn't even thank him as she sat down. Saito also brought over a chair to sit on.

"This is amazing!" Saito cried. It was far too grand for a breakfast. A huge roasted chicken taunted Saito. Other than that, there was also wine and a pie baked in the shape of a trout.

"I can't eat all this! I'll die if I do! Hey, Miss!" He prodded Louise's shoulder, only to find her glaring at him. "What?" Saito asked dubiously. Louise kept her gaze fixed. "Right, I'm getting ahead of myself. I should act more like nobility! Even though I'm not a noble."

Louise pointed to the floor, where a bowl had been placed.

"It's a bowl."

"Yes. It is."

"There's something suspicious in it."

Louise propped her chin on her hands and spoke.

"You know, familiars are supposed to stay outside. You're only in here on the floor because I especially requested it."

Thus, Saito found himself sitting dumbly on the floor, staring at the bowl sitting in front of him. In it were some sorry-looking scraps of meat floating around in a thin soup. On the edge was half a loaf of hard-looking bread.

Extending his neck, he peered over the edge of the tabletop.

He could only gaze longingly at the spectacular feast that was laid out on it. It was far beyond comparison with his meager bowl of scraps.

"Oh, Great Founder Brimir, and our lady, the Queen, we thank you for this humble meal that you have graciously provided us this morning," the harmonious sound of a prayer sounded. Louise joined in as well, closing her eyes.

Just how is that a 'humble meal?' Saito griped, still staring at the food. *That's more than a banquet. If anyone's got a 'humble meal,' it'd be me. I mean, just what the heck is in this bowl? This is worse than what you'd feed a pet.* He wanted to protest. *Even pets in Japan eat better than this!*

Irritated at this mistreatment, he laid a hand on the tabletop, only to have it slapped away by Louise.

Saito looked up resentfully at her.

"What are you doing?"

"Give me some chicken. Just a little bit will do."

"Jeez..." Grumbling, Louise stripped a bit of skin and dropped it into Saito's bowl.

"What about the meat?"

"No, I'm not going to help start a habit."

Louise herself began digging enthusiastically into the grand feast.

"Ah, it's delicious. Delicious! I think I'm going to cry," Saito muttered, while he gnawed on his hard bread.

* * *

The classrooms in the Academy of Magic were similar to university lecture halls. And like everything else, they were constructed from stone. The lecturing teacher stood at the lowest level, and the seats were arranged upward like stairs. When Saito and Louise entered, every student in the room simultaneously turned their heads towards them.

And then the laughter began. Kirche was there as well, surrounded by a group of boys.

I see, so she really does have them wrapped around her little finger. She's being treated like a queen by all of those guys. Well, it's not surprising with her impressive bust. I guess big breasts are big breasts, no matter where you go.

The familiars that everyone had brought along were a varied bunch.

Kirche's salamander was curled asleep under her chair. There were students with owls resting on their shoulders. From a window, a gigantic snake peered into the class. One boy whistled, and the snake withdrew its head. Other than those, there were also ravens and cats.

But what drew Saito's attention the most were the creatures that would've been considered fantastic monsters back in his world. He was suddenly excited. All sorts of amazing beasts were milling around him.

He spotted a lizard with six legs. *That's gotta be...* Saito tried to recall what little fantasy lore he knew. *A basilisk! I've seen one in a game.* There was also a huge eyeball floating gently in midair. What could that be? He decided to ask Louise.

"What's that freaky eye monster?"

"A bugbear."

"Then what about that octopus thing?"

"A Skua," Louise answered him in a sullen voice and sat down. Saito sat down beside her. She glared at him.

"What?"

"That's a mage's seat. Familiars aren't permitted to use it."

Begrudgingly, he lowered himself to the floor. *I wasn't allowed to eat breakfast at the table either. And this desk is really getting in the way. I'm not sitting here,* he resolved, and sat back on the chair.

Louise glanced at him, but didn't say anything this time.

The door opened, and the teacher entered.

She was a middle-aged woman dressed in a voluminous purple robe and wearing a hat. She had a plump, round face with a friendly expression on it.

"Is that lady a magician too?" Saito whispered to Louise.

"Isn't it obvious?" Louise hissed back.

The woman gazed around the classroom and spoke with a satisfied smile.

"Well, everyone, it seems that the Springtime Familiar Summoning was a great success. I, Chevreuse, always enjoy seeing the new familiars that are summoned each spring."

Louise cast her eyes downward.

"My, my. You've summoned quite a... peculiar familiar, Miss Vallière," she remarked as she looked at Saito. The comment was fairly innocent, but the classroom exploded with laughter.

"Louise the Zero! Don't go around grabbing random commoners off the street

just because you can't summon anything!"

Louise's long strawberry blonde hair billowed as she stood up. She raised her cute voice in anger.

"No! I did everything properly! He was all that appeared!"

"Don't lie! I bet you couldn't even cast 'Summon Servant' properly, right?"

The other students chuckled.

"Mrs. Chevreuse! I've been insulted! Malicorne the 'Common Cold' just insulted me!"

Louise banged her fist against the tabletop in protest.

"Common cold? I'm Malicorne the Windward! I haven't caught any cold!"

"Well, your hoarse voice sounds exactly like you've caught one!"

The boy called Malicorne stood up and glared at Louise. Chevreuse pointed at them with the wand in her hand. The two suddenly jerked about like puppets on a string and rigidly sat back down.

"Miss Vallière, Mister Malicorne. Please stop this unnecessary argument."

Louise looked visibly dejected. All the vivacity that she'd shown just earlier seemed to have evaporated.

"Calling friends 'Zero' or 'Common Cold' is not acceptable. Do you understand?"

"Mrs. Chevreuse, I'm only called that as a joke, but for Louise, it's the truth."

A few giggles broke out from somewhere.

Chevreuse looked around the classroom with a severe expression. She pointed her wand again, and, as if from nowhere, the mouths of the students who'd giggled were suddenly filled with lumps of red clay.

"You people shall continue the lesson in that state."

This put a firm stopper on any further outbursts.

"Now then, let's begin the lesson."

Chevreuse coughed heavily and waved her wand. A few pebbles materialized on her desktop.

"My Runic name is 'Red Clay.' Chevreuse the Red Clay. This year, I will be teaching you all the magic of the Earth element. Do you know the four great elements of magic, Mister Malicorne?"

"Y-Yes, Mrs. Chevreuse. They are Fire, Water, Earth and Wind."

Chevreuse nodded.

"And combined with the now-lost element of 'Void,' there are five elements in total - as everyone should already know. Of the five elements, I believe Earth holds an extremely important position. This isn't just because my affinity is Earth, nor is it simply a personal preference."

Once again, Chevreuse coughed heavily.

"The magic of Earth is very important magic that governs the creation of all matter. If it wasn't for Earth magic, we wouldn't be able to produce or process necessary metals. Raising buildings from large boulders and harvesting crops would also involve much more work. In this manner, the magic of the Earth element is intimately related to everyone's life."

Aha, thought Saito. *So in this world, magic is the equivalent of science and technology in my world. I think I understand now the reason Louise is so proud to call herself a magician.*

"Now, everyone, please recall that the basic magic of the Earth element is 'transmutation'. While there will be people here who have already learned this in their first year, basics build foundations, so let's review it once more."

Chevreuse turned her attention to the pebbles and twirled her wand over them.

She then whispered a spell, and they began to glow brightly.

When the light dimmed away, the pebbles had been changed into sparkling lumps of metal.

"Is that g-g-gold, Mrs. Chevreuse!?"

Kirche leaned forward over her desk.

"No, it isn't. It's plain brass. Only Square-class mages are able to transmute to gold. I'm just..." Chevreuse gave a self-important cough. "A Triangle mage..."

"Louise." Saito poked her.

"What? We're in the middle of a lesson here!"

"What's all this about squares and triangles supposed to mean?"

"It's the number of elements that they can add to a spell, which also determines the level of a mage."

"Huh?"

"See, for example, you can use an Earth spell on its own. But if you add Fire magic to it, the overall power of the spell increases greatly," Louise explained to Saito quietly.

"Oh, I see."

"Those who can stack two elements like Fire and Earth together are called Line mages. Mrs. Chevreuse, being able to combine three elements, Earth-Earth-Fire, is a Triangle mage."

"What happens when you add an element to itself?"

"It reinforces that element and makes it stronger."

"I see. So in other words, you could say that the teacher over there is a fairly powerful mage, because she's a Triangle?"

"Exactly."

"How many can you add, Louise?"

She didn't answer.

The teacher noticed them talking.

"Miss Vallière!"

"Y-Yes?"

"Please refrain from private chatter during lessons."

"I'm sorry..."

"Since you have the time to chatter, perhaps I should have you demonstrate for me?"

"Eh? Me?"

"Yes. Try changing these pebbles here into a metal of your choice."

Louise didn't stand up. She simply sat there looking troubled and fidgety.

"Hey, come on! She's pointing at you!" Saito nudged her.

"Miss Vallière! Is something the matter?"

Mrs. Chevreuse called for her again, but Kirche raised her voice in concern.

"Umm..."

"Yes?"

"I think it would be better if you didn't let her..."

"And why is that?"

"It's dangerous," Kirche answered plainly. The majority of the class nodded in agreement.

"Dangerous? How so?"

"This is your first time teaching Louise, right?"

"It is, but I hear she's a hard worker. Now, Miss Vallière. Don't you worry, just try it. You won't be able to do anything if you dread making mistakes."

"Don't, Louise!" Kirche cried, her face pale.

But Louise stood up.

"I'll do it."

With a nervous expression, she walked briskly up to the front of the room.

Chevreuse stood next to Louise and smiled.

"Miss Vallière, you have to visualize vividly the metal that you wish to transmute them into."

Giving a cute little nod, Louise waved her wand. She had never looked as adorable as in that instant when she pursed her lips to begin chanting the incantation - it was almost otherworldly.

Even knowing her true personality, Saito was momentarily enamoured.

In the morning sunshine streaming in from the window, Louise's strawberry-blonde hair sparkled enchantingly. Her hazel eyes shown like jewels, and her skin was a flawless white. Her sculpted nose was befitting of nobility.

If only her breasts were more filled out, she'd be perfect - almost too good. But no matter how cute she is, that personality of hers is a real pitfall, Saito lamented.

But as he sat there pondering, the students sitting in front of him had for some reason hidden under their chairs. *Don't they see how cute Louise is? Still, she doesn't seem to be very popular. Rather, she gets called 'the Zero' and made fun of. Just looking around here, there aren't any girls nearly as cute. Only Kirche rivals her in looks.*

Closing her eyes, Louise uttered a short rune and flourished her wand.

The pebbles on the desk promptly exploded.

Louise and Chevreuse caught the blast full-on and were thrown against the blackboard, as people screamed. Frightened familiars added to the chaos. Kirche's salamander suddenly woke from its sleep and stood up on its hind legs, breathing a jet of flame. A manticore burst into flight and smashed through a window to escape. Through the hole, the giant snake that had been peeking in earlier slithered in and swallowed someone's raven.

The classroom was in pandemonium.

Kirche stood up and pointed a finger at Louise.

"That's why I told you not to let her do it!"

"Jeez, Vallière! Save us some grief and just quit school already!"

"My Lucky got eaten by a snake! Lucky!"

Saito stared in shock.

Mrs. Chevreuse lay on the floor; judging by her occasional twitching, she wasn't dead.

A soot-blackened Louise rose slowly. She was a miserable sight to behold. Her torn blouse revealed a slender shoulder, and her panties could be seen beneath her ripped skirt.

Still, what an amazing girl. She didn't seem at all fazed by the discord in the room. She pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the soot off her face.

"Looks like I messed up a little..." she said, in a weak voice.

Of course, that elicited a vehement response from the other students.

"That wasn't 'a little!', Louise the Zero!"

"Your success rate is always ZERO!"

Saito finally understood why Louise was called "the Zero."

Chapter Three: Legend

Mister Colbert, a teacher who had dedicated twenty years to Tristain Magic Academy, was by now a mainstay figure.

His Runic name was "Colbert the Flame Snake," and, naturally, he was a mage specializing in fire magic.

Since the Springtime Familiar Summoning a few days ago, he'd been concerned about the commoner boy that Louise had summoned. Or more precisely, he'd been concerned with nothing but the runes that had appeared on that boy's left hand. They were rare runes indeed, so for the last few nights, he'd confined himself to the library and had been researching various texts.

Tristain Magic Academy's library was located in the same tower as the dining hall. The bookshelves were unbelievably tall, about thirty mails in height, and the way they were lined up against the walls was a spectacle to behold. And rightly so, since this place was crammed with the history of everything following the creation of the new world in Halkeginia by the Founder Brimir.

Colbert was now in a section called "Fenrir's Library" that only teachers were allowed entry to.

The ordinary bookshelves, to which students had free access, didn't hold any answers that could satisfy him.

He Levitated up to an out-of-reach shelf and scanned it intently for a particular book. His efforts were rewarded as his gaze fell upon the title of the book. It was a very old text which held descriptions of the familiars that had been used by the Founder Brimir.

His attention was focused on one particular paragraph written in it, and as he read on in fascination, his eyes grew wide. He compared the book with the sketch he'd made of the runes on the boy's left hand.

"Ah!" he gasped in surprise. At that moment, he lost the concentration necessary for maintaining his Levitation and almost fell to the floor.

Holding the book in his arms, he hurriedly descended to the floor and ran out of the library.

His destination was the Headmaster's Office.

* * *

The Headmaster's Office was located on the topmost floor of the tower. Sir Osmond, the current Headmaster of Tristain Magic Academy, was sitting with his elbows propped on his elegantly built sequoia desk, looking unbearably bored as he shook his white beard and hair.

Idly plucking out nose hairs, he slowly murmured "hrm" and pulled open a desk drawer. From inside he procured a smoking pipe. Miss Longueville, the secretary who had been writing something at the other desk placed to the side of the room, waved her feather quill.

The pipe floated into the air and landed in Miss Longueville's palm. Sir Osmond muttered dejectedly, "Is it fun taking away an old man's little pleasures? Miss, um..."

"Managing your health is also part of my job, Old Osmond."

Sir Osmond stood up from his chair and walked up to the cool and collected Miss Longueville. Stopping behind the seated lady, he closed his eyes, his expression grave.

"If the days keep passing by so peacefully, figuring out how to spend time is going to become a rather big problem."

The wrinkles etched deeply on Osmond's face were only hints to the history of his life. People guessed him to be a hundred years old, even three hundred. But his true age no one really knew. It's possible he himself didn't remember anymore either.

"Old Osmond," Miss Longueville spoke up without taking her eyes off the feather quill that was scribbling away on the parchment.

"What is it? Miss..."

"Please stop saying you have nothing to do as an excuse to touch my bottom."

Sir Osmond opened his mouth slightly and began walking around in tottering steps.

"Please also refrain from pretending to be senile whenever a situation goes bad," Longueville added calmly. Sir Osmond sighed deeply. It was the sigh of a man bearing the weight of many troubles.

"Where do you think the ultimate truth may be? Haven't you ever wondered that? Miss..."

"Wherever it is, I assure you, it's not underneath my skirt, so please stop sneaking your mouse under the desk."

Sir Osmond's face fell, and he murmured sadly, "Mótsognir."

From under Miss Longueville's desk scurried out a little mouse. It dashed up Osmond's leg and perched on his shoulder, twitching its tiny head. He fished out some nuts from a pocket and held one out to the mouse.

"Chuchu," the mouse chittered, apparently pleased.

"You're my only truly trustworthy friend, Mótsognir."

The mouse began nibbling on the nut. It disappeared quickly, and the mouse chittered "chuchu" once more.

"Ah, yes, yes. You want more? Very well, I shall give you more. But first, I would ask that you report back, Mótsognir."

"Chuchu"

"I see. White and plain white too, hrm. But Miss Longueville should really stick to black. Wouldn't you agree, my cute Mótsognir?"

Miss Longueville's eyebrows twitched.

"Old Osmond."

"What is it?"

"The next time you do that, I'm reporting it to the palace."

"Kah! Do you think I could be Headmaster of this Academy if I was scared of the palace all the time?!"

Sir Osmond flashed his eyes wide and yelled angrily. It was an impressive display, completely unexpected of a frail-looking old man.

"Don't get all prissy just because I peeked at your underwear! At this rate, you'll never get married! Haa~~ To be young again~~ Miss..."

Old Osmond began stroking Miss Longueville's bottom without hesitation.

Miss Longueville stood up and wordlessly kicked her boss around.

"Sorry. Stop. Ow. I won't do it anymore. Really."

Old Osmond covered his head and cowered. Miss Longueville breathed heavily as she continued kicking Osmond.

"Ack! How can you! Treat a senior! In this way! Hey! Ouch!"

This "peaceful" moment was interrupted by a sudden intrusion.

The door was thrown open with a slam, and Colbert rushed inside.

"Old Osmond!"

"What is it?"

Miss Longueville was back at her desk, sitting there as if nothing had happened. Sir Osmond had his arms behind him, and turned to face the visitor with a serious expression. That was certainly a quick recovery.

"I-I-I have some big news!"

"There is no such thing as big news. Everything is but a collection of small events."

"P-P-Please take a look at this!"

Colbert handed Osmond the book he had been reading just before.

"This is "The Familiars of the Founder Brimir," is it not? Are you still going around digging up old literature like this? If you have time to do that, why don't you think up some better ways of collecting school fees from those slack nobles? Mister, err... What was it again?"

Sir Osmond cocked his head.

"It's Colbert! You forgot?!"

"Right, right. Now I remember. It's just that you talked so fast I never really caught it. So, Colby, what is it about this book?"

"Please take a look at this also!"

Colbert then handed him the sketch of the runes on Saito's left hand.

The moment he saw that, Osmond's expression changed. His eyes took on a solemn light.

"Miss Longueville, would you please excuse us?"

Miss Longueville stood up and left the room. Osmond spoke only after he confirmed she was properly outside.

"Explain this to me with every detail, Mister Colbert..."

* * *

It was just before lunchtime when they finally finished tidying up the classroom that Louise had made a mess of. As punishment, using magic to clean up had been forbidden, so it had taken considerable time to finish. But then again,

Louise couldn't really use most spells anyway, so it hadn't affected her much. Mrs. Chevreuse had regained consciousness two hours after she'd been caught in the explosion, and while she did return to class, she didn't give any more lectures on Transmutation for that entire day. It would seem she had been rather traumatized.

Having finished tidying up, Louise and Saito headed to the dining hall for lunch. Along the way, Saito made fun of Louise over and over. After all, it was Louise's fault that he'd had to do all that manual labor just now. It was Saito who had carried over the new window glass. It was Saito who had moved all the heavy desks. And of course, it was Saito who had wiped the soot-blackened classroom clean with a cloth. All Louise had done was wipe down a few desks, and reluctantly at that.

I have to sleep on the floor. The food sucks. And on top of that, I have to wash underwear. (Not that I've done it yet.)

With all that mistreatment from Louise, there was no way Saito could keep quiet about her new-found weakness. He teased Louise like there was no tomorrow.

"'Louise the Zero.' Now I get it~ That's just perfect~ Rate of success is zero. But a noble despite that... wonderful!"

Louise didn't say a word, which only roused Saito further.

"Transmutation! Ah! Kaboom! Transmutation! Ah! Kaboom! Oh, I screwed up! Only 'the Zero' screws this up!"

Saito danced circles around Louise like this, raising his arms every time he said "kaboom," mimicking an explosion. It was quite a detailed performance.

"Mistress Louise. This humble familiar has made a song for you."

Saito said, bowing his head respectfully. Of course, it was an empty gesture, a complete mockery.

Louise's eyebrow was twitching furiously. She was on the verge of blowing her top, but Saito was too absorbed in his excitement to notice that.

"Why don't you go ahead and sing it?"

"'Lou-Lou-Louise is such a hopeless case~ A magician that can't even use magic! But that's all right! Because she's a girl...'"

Saito held his stomach as he burst into laughter.

"Bwahahaha!!"

He was laughing at his own joke. Perhaps he was just as hopeless.

* * *

When they arrived at the dining hall, Saito pulled out a chair for Louise.

"Just remember, my lady. Don't cast any spells on the food. Just imagine the mess if it exploded."

Louise took the seat wordlessly. Saito was feeling thoroughly satisfied, having got one back on the rude and arrogant Louise with his putdowns. Even the usual excuse for a meal didn't bother him as much.

While the meager soup and bread he got served was still painful to behold, it was a pretty even trade-off for getting to laugh so much earlier.

"Right then, Founder someone-or-another. Your Highness the Queen. Thanks a bunch for the crappy food. Itadakimasu."

As he went to eat, the plate was snatched away.

"What are you doing?!"

"Th-th-th..."

"'Th-th-th'?"

Louise's shoulders shook angrily, as did her voice. Somehow, she'd managed to reign in her overflowing fury until they'd arrived at the dining table. Probably so that she could bestow an appropriate punishment.

"Th-th-th-this familiar, how dare it say s-s-s-such things to its m-m-m-master?"

Saito realized he'd gone too far.

"I'm sorry! I won't say any more, so give me back my food!"

"No! Absolu~~tely not!"

Louise screamed, twisting her cute face in rage.

"One meal cut for every time you've said 'Zero!' And that's final! No exceptions!"

* * *

In the end, Saito left the dining hall without having eaten anything.

I shouldn't have been so sarcastic about it... But it was too late to regret.

"Haa, I'm starving... Damn..."

Clutching his stomach, he leaned one hand on a wall.

"Is something the matter?"

He turned around to see a normal-looking girl in a maid's outfit carrying a big silver tray, looking concernedly at him. Her black hair was neatly adorned with a headband, and her freckles were cute.

"It's nothing..." Saito waved his left hand.

"Are you by any chance the one who became Miss Vallière's familiar...?"

It seemed she noticed the runes inscribed on Saito's left hand.

"You know me?"

"A little. It's become quite a rumor, you know, that a commoner was called by

the summoning magic."

The girl smiled sweetly. It was the first carefree smile Saito had seen since he came to this world.

"Are you a mage too?" Saito asked.

"Oh no, not me. I'm a commoner, just like you. I serve the nobility here by doing domestic duties."

I'm actually from Earth and not a commoner, but it's probably useless to try to explain. Saito decided to just introduce himself.

"I see... Well, I'm Hiraga Saito. Nice to meet you."

"That's quite a strange name... I'm Siesta."

At that point, Saito's stomach grumbled.

"You must be hungry."

"Yeah..."

"Please follow me this way."

Siesta walked off.

* * *

Saito was led to the kitchen located at the rear of the dining hall. Lots of large pots and ovens were lined up inside. Cooks and other maids like Siesta were busily preparing food.

"Please wait one moment, okay?"

Siesta had Saito sit on a chair placed in the corner of the kitchen and disappeared hastily into the back.

She soon returned with a bowl full of warm stew in her hands.

"This is some stew made from the leftovers of the nobles' meals. If you don't mind, please eat this."

"Can I?"

"Yes. It's only the staff meal though..."

Her kindness was touching. This was completely different from the soup that Louise had given him. He scooped up a spoonful and brought it to his mouth. *Delicious. I'm going to cry.*

"This is so good~!"

"That's great. There's plenty if you want seconds, so take your time."

Saito ate the stew as if in a dream. Siesta stood watching him, smiling sweetly all the while.

"Weren't you given anything to eat?"

"That girl went and took my plate away when I called her 'Louise the Zero.'"

"Oh no! You shouldn't say things like that to nobles!"

"Noble schnoble. Getting all high-horsed just because they can use magic."

"You must have a lot of courage..."

Siesta looked at Saito with an expression of amazement.

Saito gave Siesta back the empty bowl.

"That was really tasty. Thanks."

"I'm glad you liked it. Feel free to visit whenever you're hungry. If you don't mind having whatever we're having, I'd be happy to share."

Such a kind offer. Saito was even more touched.

"Thanks..."

Saito suddenly broke out in tears, surprising Siesta.

"Wh-what's the matter?"

"No... It's just that it's the first time anyone's been so nice to me since I came here... I got a bit emotional..."

"Th-that's an exaggeration."

"It's not. If there's anything I can do for you, just tell me. I'll lend a hand."

He wasn't particularly interested in something like washing Louise's underwear, and would much rather help this girl instead.

"In that case, please help me serve the desserts."

Siesta said with a smile.

"Okay," Saito nodded enthusiastically.

* * *

Lots of dessert cakes were arranged on a big silver tray. Saito carried the tray, while Siesta picked up the cakes with tongs and served them one by one to the nobles.

One mage in particular stood out. He had curly blonde hair, wore a frill-trimmed shirt, and looked rather self-important. There was a rose stuck in his shirt pocket too. His friends around him were poking all kinds of fun at him.

"So, Guiche! Who're you going out with now?"

"Who's your lover, Guiche?"

So it seemed the prideful mage was called Guiche. He gently raised a finger to his lips.

"'Go out?' I hold no one woman in such special regard. After all, a rose blooms for the pleasure of many."

This guy's likening himself to a rose. An egotist like this is far beyond help. He was the kind of narcissist that made onlookers more embarrassed than himself. Saito glared at him, hoping he'd just die.

At that moment, something fell out of Guiche's pocket. It was a small glass bottle with a purple liquid swirling inside it.

I don't really like this guy, but I should still tell him he dropped something.

Saito called out to Guiche.

"Oi, you dropped this bottle from your pocket."

But Guiche didn't turn around. *This guy's ignoring me!*

Saito passed the tray to Siesta and bent down to pick up the bottle.

"I said, you dropped something, playboy."

He placed it on the table. Guiche shot Saito a dirty look, and pushed the bottle away.

"This is not mine. What are you talking about?"

Guiche's friends then realized where the bottle came from and raised a loud commotion.

"Ooh? That perfume, isn't that Montmorency's?"

"Yeah! That vivid purple color is the perfume that Montmorency only mixes for herself!"

"So to have something like that fall out of your pocket, Guiche, means that you're going out with Montmorency now, right?"

"No wait, listen to me. I'm saying this for the sake of her reputation, but..."

As Guiche was about to say more, a girl, who wore a brown cloak and had been sitting at the table behind them, stood up and walked over to Guiche's seat.

She was a cute girl sporting chestnut-colored hair. According to the color of the cloak she wore, she was a first year student.

"Guiche-sama..."

And with that, she started crying uncontrollably.

"I knew it, you and Miss Montmorency are..."

"They’re misunderstanding. Katie, listen. The only person I hold in my heart is

you..."

But the girl called Katie slapped Guiche's face as hard as she could.

"That perfume you dropped from your pocket is more than enough proof! Goodbye!"

Guiche rubbed his cheek.

At this point, a girl with tightly rolled hair stood up from a seat further down the table. Saito recognized her as the girl who'd had the argument with Louise when he was first summoned to this world.

Wearing a severe expression, she approached Guiche with quick clipped steps.

"Montmorency. This is a misunderstanding. All I did was accompany her on a long trip to the forests of La Rochelle..." Guiche said, shaking his head. While he was pretending to remain composed, a drop of cold sweat ran down his forehead.

"Just as I thought! You've been making moves on that first year, haven't you?!"

"Please, Montmorency the Fragrance. Don't twist your rose-like face in anger like that. It saddens me to see it!"

Montmorency grabbed a bottle of wine that was on the table and poured its contents out audibly on Guiche's head.

And then...

"You liar!"

She yelled and stormed off.

Silence fell upon the hall.

Guiche pulled out a handkerchief and slowly wiped his face. Shaking his head, he spoke dramatically.

"It would seem those ladies do not understand the meaning of a rose's existence."

Yeah, and you just keep trying that, Saito thought, as he took the tray back from

Siesta and began walking off.

Guiche called him to a stop.

"Stop right there."

"What now?"

Guiche spun his body about on the chair and crossed his legs with a flourish. It gave Saito a headache to see such arrogance exude from every action.

"Thanks to you thoughtlessly picking up some bottle of perfume, the reputation of two ladies has been damaged. How will you take responsibility?"

Saito replied in an exasperated tone.

"Hey, it's your fault for two-timing."

Guiche's friends burst out laughing.

"Exactly, Guiche! It's your fault!"

Guiche's face flushed crimson.

"Listen, server. When you put the bottle of perfume on the table, I pretended not to know anything, didn't I? Would it have hurt to be a little bit tactful and just go along with it?"

"Whatever. Either way, your two-timing would've been blown anyway. And also, I'm not a server."

"Hmph... Ah, you are..."

Guiche snorted, as if looking down on Saito.

"You must be the commoner summoned by that "Louise the Zero." To have expected a noble's wits from a commoner was completely my mistake. You may leave."

Saito snapped then. Pretty boy or not, there was no way Saito was just going to stand there quietly taking all this from such a conceited narcissist. He couldn't

help but make one inflammatory comment.

"Shut up you over-pretentious bastard. Why don't you go suck on roses for the rest of your life?"

Guiche's eyes narrowed.

"It would seem that you don't know the proper etiquette for addressing a noble."

"Unfortunately, I come from a world where there are no such people as nobles."

Saito raised his right hand and spoke imperiously, mimicking Guiche's actions.

"Very well. Then I shall teach you a lesson about respect. A perfect way to relieve some stress."

Guiche stood up.

"How amusing."

Saito bared his teeth and growled. *First, I didn't like this guy right from the start. Second, he's going out with two fairly cute girls - though neither are as cute as Louise. And last, he made a fool of me.*

That's more than enough reason for me to fight. And while I'm at it, I'll hit him a couple more times on Louise's behalf. After all, she's still a girl!

"You wanna do it here?"

Saito said. Despite being taller than Saito, Guiche was the lanky type and looked rather weak. Playboys are said to be lacking both money and power. Saito wasn't particularly strong himself, but he didn't think he'd lose.

Guiche turned in the other direction.

"Are you running away?"

"Don't be stupid. I can't taint the dining table of nobles with the blood of a commoner, can I? I'll be waiting at Vestri[5] Court. Come once you're finished delivering those cakes."

Looking excited, Guiche's friends stood up and followed him off.

One person remained though, as if to make sure Saito didn't run away himself.

Siesta gazed at Saito, her entire body quivering. Saito spoke with a grin.

"It's all right. There's no way I'll lose to that weakling. Some noble, huh?"

"You... You're going to get killed."

"What?"

"If you truly anger a noble..."

Siesta dashed off in a hurry.

What was that about? Saito muttered. *Is that guy really that strong?*

Louise ran up to him from behind.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?! I saw all that!"

"Yo, Louise."

"This is no time to be "yo"-ing me! How can you just go promising duels like it's no big deal?!"

"But that guy was really irritating me..."

Saito said indignantly.

Louise sighed and shrugged disappointedly.

"Apologize to him."

"Why?"

"If you don't want to be hurt, go and apologize. If you do it now, he might forgive you."

"Are you kidding! Why do **I** have to apologize?! He insulted me first! And

besides, I was only being helpful..."

"Just do it."

Louise fixed Saito with a firm look.

"No way."

"So stubborn... But you know what? You can't win. You'll be badly injured. Actually, you'll be lucky to come back alive with just injuries."

"I won't know that unless I try, right?"

"Listen, a commoner can never beat a mage!"

"So where's this Vestri Court?"

Saito walked off. The friend of Guiche's that had been watching Louise and Saito's exchange pointed with his chin.

"This way, commoner."

"Aaah, jeez! Really! Why does this familiar keep going off and doing stuff on its own?!"

With that, Louise chased after Saito.

* * *

Vestri Court was the central garden situated between the Wind and Fire elemental towers. Being located to the west, the Court didn't receive much sunshine, even in the middle of the day, but it was the perfect place for a duel.

Right now... the place was packed with people who had heard the rumors.

"Gentlemen! It's a duel!"

Guiche lifted his artificial rose high, eliciting a loud cheer from the crowd.

"Guiche is going to duel! His opponent is Louise's commoner!"

I have a name too y'know... Saito thought bitterly.

Waving his arms about, Guiche acknowledged the cheering.

And then, as if finally noticing Saito's presence there, he turned to face him.

Saito and Guiche stood in the middle of the Court, glaring intently at each other.

"First of all, I commend you for coming here instead of running away!" Guiche remarked in a sing-song voice, as he twirled his rose.

"Like anyone would run away!"

"Right then, let us begin," said Guiche.

Less talk, more action. Saito rushed forward. *Fights are won by whoever gets in the first strike!*

It's roughly ten paces to where Guiche is. I don't care much for nobles or mages; I'm just going to crush that arrogant nose of yours down to size!

Guiche watched Saito with a leisurely smile and flicked his rose.

A petal floated down as if dancing in the air...

And became the armor-clad shape of a female warrior.

Its height was about the same as a person’s, but it appeared to be constructed from some hard metal. Under the pale sunlight, its skin... its armor gleamed.

It stood stoically in Saito's way.

"Wh-what the heck is this?!"

"I am a mage, therefore I fight using magic. Surely you have no complaints?"

"Wh-why you..."

"I guess I forgot to mention earlier. My Runic name is "the Bronze." Guiche the

Bronze. Accordingly, my bronze golem "Valkyrie" shall be your real opponent."

"Eh?"

The warrior-shaped golem charged towards Saito.

Its right fist impacted heavily with Saito's stomach.

"Harg!"

Saito groaned and collapsed to the ground. Not at all surprising, considering he'd been gut-punched by a bronze fist.

The golem looked down on Saito emotionlessly.

He couldn't stand up through the pain. *I guess this is what it feels like to be hit by a pro boxer,* he thought.

"What, over already?"

Guiche sounded dissatisfied. From the mass of people, Louise burst out.

"Guiche!"

"Oh, Louise! My bad. I'm just borrowing your familiar for a bit."

Louise shook her long hair and yelled angrily at Guiche.

"That's quite enough! And besides, dueling is strictly forbidden!"

"Only dueling between nobles is forbidden. Nobody has forbidden duels between commoners and nobles."

Louise was at a momentary loss for words.

"Th-that's because nothing like this has ever happened before..."

"Louise, do you like this commoner?"

Louise's face burned an angry scarlet.

"No! Don't be ridiculous! It's just that I won't put up with having my familiar beaten up before my eyes!"

"...Wh-who's being beaten up? I'm just fine."

"Saito!"

Seeing Saito was up again, Louise practically screamed out his name.

"...Hehehe, you've finally called me by my name."

Louise was trembling.

"You understand now, right? A commoner can never beat a mage!"

"...I was a little careless, that's all. I'm all right, so step back."

Saito pushed Louise back.

"What's this? I didn't think you could stand up again... Maybe I went too easy on you?" said Guiche, provoking Saito further.

Saito walked slowly towards Guiche. Louise followed him and grabbed his shoulder.

"You need to stop! Idiot! Why are you still standing?"

He shook her hand off his shoulder.

"Because he pisses me off."

"He pisses you off? Look, there's no embarrassment in losing to a mage!"

"Shut up," Saito muttered as he kept taking unsteady steps forward.

"Eh?"

"Really, you're starting to get on my nerves too... I know next to nothing about mages or nobles, but to me you're all the same bunch of ego-inflated brats. Just what's so brilliant about magic? Idiots."

Guiche watched Saito with a faint smile painted on his face.

"The more you try, the more pointless this becomes."

Saito's characteristic fighting spirit flared, and he uttered a short growl.

"That was nothing. Your little statue, it's too weak."

The smile fell away. The golem's right hand lashed out to strike Saito's face. He caught the blow square on the cheek and was knocked to the ground.

Blood dripped from his broken nose.

Trying to stem the blood flow, Saito was taken aback.

Crap... So this is a mage's power. I've been in a few fights here and there, but that punch was like nothing else I'd received before.

Despite that, he rose shakily to a stand. Guiche's golem mercilessly sent him flying once more with a kick.

He got up again. And was struck down again.

Over and over, the process was repeated.

The eighth punch connected with Saito's right arm. There was a sick snapping noise.

Unable to see out of his swollen shut left eye, he checked his arm with his right eye. It was bent at a wrong angle.

While Saito stared blankly at his arm, the golem came over and planted a foot on his face.

His head hit the earth hard, and he lost consciousness for a moment.

When he came to, he could see Louise's face framed by a backdrop of blue sky.

"Please. Just stop now."

Louise's hazel eyes were wet with tears.

Saito tried to speak, but the pain in his chest from the repeated blows was hard to overcome.

Regardless, he concentrated his willpower and managed to croak in a hoarse voice.

"...Are you crying?"

"I am not! Who would cry here? Anyway, this is enough. You did very well. I've never seen a commoner like you before."

His broken arm throbbed with agony. Saito grimaced.

"That... hurts."

"Of course it hurts! That's obvious! Just what were you thinking?"

Tears ran down Louise's face and fell on Saito's cheek.

"You're my familiar, understand? I'm not going to forgive you for any more stupid acts."

Guiche's voice called out to the pair.

"Are we quite done yet?"

"...Hold your horses. I'm just catching my breath."

"Saito!"

Guiche smiled, and flicked his rose. This time, the petal transformed into a sword. Guiche grabbed it and threw it in Saito's direction. The blade point stabbed into the ground not too far from where Saito lay.

"If you're still willing to continue, then take that sword. If not, all you need to say is a simple "I'm sorry." Then I can just forgive you and be done with it."

"Don't insult him!"

Louise yelled, standing up. But Guiche gave no indication that he had heard her and kept talking.

"Understand? The sword. In other words, a weapon. It's the very least you commoners will need if you want to take revenge against us nobles. So as I said, if you're still up for it, take that sword."

Saito reached out for the blade with his right hand. But with that arm broken, he couldn't put much strength in his fingers.

His hand was stopped by Louise.

"No! There is absolutely no way I'm letting you do this! If you take that sword, Guiche won't show any mercy!"

"I can't go back to my world... Which means I'm stuck living in this one, right?" Saito muttered, almost to himself. He didn't look at Louise.

"That's right. So what about it?! Right now that doesn't matter!!"

Louise held his right hand tightly. Saito declared in a clear strong voice.

"I don't mind being a familiar... I can take sleeping on the floor... I don't care if the food sucks... Washing underwear? I'll do that too. It's not like I really have a choice."

Saito paused there and curled his left hand into a fist.

"But..."

""But..." What?"

"I will not bow to anyone against my will!"

Drawing on his last reserves of strength, Saito forced himself to a stand. Pushing Louise aside, he grabbed the blade stuck in the ground with his left hand.

In that instant...

The runes inscribed on that hand began glowing brightly.

* * *

Let us change locations for a moment and return to the Headmaster's Office.

Mister Colbert was fervently explaining everything to Sir Osmond about the commoner boy that was summoned by Louise at the Springtime Familiar Summoning... About how he was concerned about the runes that had appeared on the boy's hand as proof of the contract between him and Louise... And that when he had gone to find out more...

"You reached the Founder Brimir's familiar Gandálfr?"

Osmond intently examined Colbert's sketch of the runes on Saito's left hand.

"Yes! The runes that appeared on that boy's left hand are exactly the same as the runes that were inscribed on the legendary familiar Gandálfr!"

"So, your conclusion?"

"That boy is Gandálfr! If this isn't big news, then what is, Old Osmond?"

Colbert stood up as he wiped his balding head with a handkerchief.

"Hrm... Certainly, the runes are the same. But for an ordinary commoner boy to become Gandálfr just by having the same runes... I wonder how that could've happened."

"What shall we do?"

"However, it is probably too early to be making definite claims."

"That's true."

Sir Osmond drummed his fingers on the desk.

There was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?"

From behind the door came Miss Longueville's voice.

"It's me, Old Osmond."

"What is it?"

"It seems there are some students dueling at Vestri Courts. It's causing quite a commotion. A few teachers have gone there to try and stop it, but their attempts are being impeded by the sheer number of students."

"For heaven's sake, there's nothing worse than nobles with too much free time in their hands. So, who's involved?"

"One of them is Guiche de Gramont."

"Ah, that idiot son of Gramont. Skirt-chasing must run in the family, considering his father's even more of a womanizer. I wouldn't be surprised if the boy knows every girl in school. And his opponent is?"

"...Well, it's not a mage. I've been told it's Miss Vallière's familiar."

Osmond and Colbert exchanged a look.

"The teachers are requesting to use the "Bell of Sleep" to stop the duel."

Osmond's eyes glinted like a hawk's.

"Ridiculous. There's no need to use such an important artifact just to stop a children's fight. Leave them be."

"Understood."

Miss Longueville's footsteps disappeared down the hallway.

Colbert swallowed audibly and verbally pressed Osmond.

"Old Osmond."

"Hrm."

Sir Osmond waved his staff and a big mirror set in the wall began scrying the situation at Vestri Courts.

* * *

Saito was surprised. The moment he grabbed the sword, all the pain in his body disappeared.

He realized the runes on his left hand were glowing.

And then...

My body feels as light as a feather. I could almost take off and fly.

In addition, the blade he held in his left hand felt so familiar that it seemed like an extension of his body.

That's strange. I've never even touched a sword before...

Seeing Saito with the weapon in hand, Guiche smiled coldly.

"Firstly, let me congratulate you. I'm honestly quite impressed that a commoner would come this far against a mage."

With that, he twirled the rose in his hand.

That artificial rose must be his wand. Really, how vain can you get?

Saito was astonished that he even had the leisure to think such things.

I was beaten up so badly just now. What in the world happened to me?

Guiche's golem attacked again.

Stupid tin can.

The statue modeled in the shape of the mythical Valkyrie came towards Saito in what seemed like slow motion.

What the hell, Saito thought.

*I got kicked around like a rag doll by **this** crawling junk pile?*

Saito leapt into action.

At the sight of his golem sliced in two as though it was a lump of clay, Guiche uttered a tormented moan.

The two halves of the golem each struck the ground with a resounding "clang."

Meanwhile, Saito bolted towards Guiche in a whirlwind of action.

Panicking, Guiche waved his rose wand wildly. Petals danced, and six new golems appeared.

Altogether, seven golems were Guiche's full arsenal. Never had he thought that a mere commoner could be a match for even one.

The golems surrounded Saito and sprang at him all at once.

And just when it looked like they had him, five of them were slashed apart. It had been so fast that nobody even saw the blade, making everyone wonder just what kind of superhuman ability this was.

The remaining golem promptly dashed over to guard Guiche.

But it too was taken down by an unseen sword-stroke.

"Hiii!!"

A kick to the face sent Guiche sprawling to the ground.

He saw Saito leap at him.

I'm gonna die! he thought, as he shielded his head.

Something made a loud "thunk"...

When he timidly opened his eyes again...

Saito had driven the blade into the ground just to the right of Guiche's head.

"You want to continue?"

Saito asked.

Guiche shook his head furiously. He'd totally lost any will to fight.

And in a failing voice he said,

"I... I yield."

Saito released his hand and walked away.

He could hear rowdy cheering from the audience such as "Whoa, that familiar is awesome!" or "Oh man, Guiche lost!"

I... won?

How?

Saito's thoughts were in a haze.

...Just what happened to me?

I was getting knocked around so mercilessly.

And then, the moment my hand touched that sword, my body felt like a feather. The next thing I knew, all of Guiche's golems were in pieces.

I didn't even know I could use a sword.

I don't quite understand it, but whatever. I won somehow, and that's that. I'll think about it later. Because right now, I feel really really tired. I want to sleep.

He could see Louise running over to him.

'Hey, I won!' he wanted to yell, but his knees buckled.

The feeling of fatigue overwhelmed him, and he could feel his consciousness drift far away. Saito collapsed.

As she saw Saito begin to teeter, Louise ran faster to try and support him, but she didn't quite make it. Saito toppled over onto hard ground with a heavy thud.

"Saito!"

Louise shook him. No, it seemed he wasn't dead.

"Guu..."

She could hear snoring. Instead, he was sleeping.

"He's asleep..."

Louise looked thoroughly relieved as she let out a sigh.

Guiche stood up and shook his head in amazement.

"Louise, just what is this guy? All of my Valkyries were so easily defeated..."

"He's just a commoner."

"There's no way my golems could have lost to "just a commoner.""

"Hmph. Wasn't it just because you were weaker?"

Louise went to lift Saito up, but unable to properly support him, ended up falling down with him on top of her.

"Aaah, jeez! You're so heavy! Idiot!"

One of the students amidst the crowd cast a Levitation spell on Saito.

Louise began to gently push Saito's floating body away. She needed to take him back up to her room and patch him up.

With the corner of a sleeve, Louise dabbed at her eyes. He looked so in pain, so pitiful, she couldn't help but cry. He'd become so strong all of a sudden when he grabbed the sword, but if it hadn't been for that, he really might have died.

Right now, that was more important than Saito winning. *I bet this idiot thought it probably wouldn't matter if he died. Going around being so headstrong like that, when you're just a commoner...*

"You're just a familiar, so why do you keep doing stuff on your own?!"

Louise yelled at the sleeping Saito. Her relief was quickly being replaced by

annoyance.

* * *

Sir Osmond and Colbert finished watching the entire event via the Mirror of Far-Seeing. They exchanged another look.

"Old Osmond."

"Hrm."

"That commoner actually ended up winning..."

"Hrm."

"Guiche is only a first level Dot mage, but even so, he shouldn't have been beaten by an average commoner. What amazing speed! I've never seen a commoner like him before! There's no doubt that he's Gandálfr!"

"Hrmm..."

Mister Colbert urged Osmond.

"Old Osmond. We should report this to the palace immediately and ask for instructions..."

"There will be no need for that."

Sir Osmond nodded sternly, ruffling his white beard.

"But sir! This is the biggest discovery of the century! A Gandálfr reborn in the modern world!"

"Mister Colbert. Gandálfr was no ordinary familiar."

"Exactly! The familiar used by the Founder Brimir, Gandálfr! There was never any description of its appearance, but it's said to have been created specifically for the purpose of protecting the Founder Brimir during his spell incantations."

"Correct. Founder Brimir's incantations were especially long... However, that made his spells very powerful. And as you know, mages are most vulnerable while spell casting. Gandálfr was the familiar that he used to protect himself in those times of vulnerability. Its strength..."

Colbert eagerly cut in at this point, looking extremely excited.

"It could annihilate an army of one thousand all by itself! Ordinary mages were said to be no match for it!"

"So, Mister Colbert."

"Yes?"

"That boy, he really is just an average commoner, right?"

"Yes. No matter how I looked, he was just an average commoner. I even confirmed it with a Detect Magic spell when Miss Vallière initially summoned him, but he was still a genuine average commoner."

"And who was it that turned him into a modern Gandálfr?"

"That would be Miss Vallière, but..."

"She must be a very talented mage, I take it?"

"Not at all. Rather, one might say she's *un*-talented..."

"A puzzling duo to be sure."

"Yes."

"So how did an average boy contracted by an untalented mage become Gandálfr? What an utter paradox. I just can't see where the ends meet."

"Indeed..."

"In any case, there is no need for us to hand over Gandálfr and its master to those fools at the palace. Give them a toy like this and they'll just cause another unnecessary war. Court advisors have too much free time on their hands and like fighting far too much."

"O-oh, I see. I apologize for overlooking such important matters."

"I will take responsibility of this case myself. You will not speak of this to anyone else, Mister Colbert."

"Y-yes! I understand!"

Sir Osmond took hold of his staff and turned to look out the window. He immersed his thoughts in the far reaches of history.

"The legendary familiar Gandálfr... Just what kind of form had it taken before, I cannot help but wonder."

Colbert murmured as if dreaming.

"Gandálfr was said to be able to use any weapon to take down its enemies..."

"Hrm."

"So it must have at least an arm and a hand, I think."

* * *

The morning light woke Saito up. His body was wrapped all over in bandages.

That's right.

I got into a duel with that Guiche and got beaten up really badly...

Then I pulled off some miraculous win using that sword...

And I fainted.

He was in Louise's room. For some reason, he'd been sleeping in Louise's bed too.

Louise herself was sitting at a table and sleeping soundly with her head on it.

His eyes fell upon the runes on his left hand. When those runes had been glowing, his body had felt as light as a feather, a sword he had never held before felt like an extension of his arm, and he had sliced up Guiche's golems like nothing.

Right now, those runes weren't glowing.

What exactly was that, I wonder...

While he stared at his left hand curiously, there was a knock on the door before it opened.

It was Siesta. The commoner girl who had fed him stew at the kitchen. She was in her usual maid outfit, complete with the headband adorning her hair.

She looked at Saito and smiled. On the silver tray she carried was some bread and water.

"Siesta...?"

"So you're awake now, Saito-san?"

"Yeah... I..."

"After all that, Miss Vallière had you brought up here to sleep. She had to get a teacher to cast a spell of healing on you too. It was quite serious."

"Spell of healing?"

"Yes. It's magic to help treat injuries or illness. You didn't know?"

"No..."

Saito shook his head. It confused Siesta that Saito didn't know some of the basic terminology, but she wouldn't get anywhere by not saying anything.

"Miss Vallière paid for the reagent that was required for the healing spell, so don't be concerned about it."

His silence was a clear indicator that he was concerned about the money.

"Did that reagent cost a lot?"

"Well, it's certainly not something a commoner could pay."

Saito made an attempt to get up, but cried out in pain.

"Ouch!"

"Ah, you shouldn't move! Your injuries were so severe even the healing spells couldn't completely fix them! You still need to take it easy!"

Saito nodded and lay back on the bed.

"I brought you some food. Please eat."

Siesta placed the tray by Saito's bedside.

"Thanks... How long was I asleep for?"

"Three days and nights straight. Everyone was worried you wouldn't wake up."

"Everyone?"

"All the kitchen staff..."

Siesta cast her eyes down shyly.

"What's the matter?"

"Um... I'm sorry. That I ran away that time."

She was talking of how she had run away in fright when Saito had gotten Guiche angry at the dining hall.

"Don't worry. It's nothing to apologize about."

"Nobles were always so scary to us commoners, since we couldn't use magic..."

Siesta suddenly raised her head. Her eyes sparkled brightly.

"But I'm not so scared anymore! I was so inspired, Saito-san! You won against a

noble, though you're a commoner!"

"Really... Haha."

Although I really have no clue how I actually won.

Somewhat embarrassed, Saito just scratched his head. Then he realized he was using his right arm, which had been broken. It looked completely fine. It still ached a bit when he moved it, but it seemed the bones were whole again.

Wow, so this is magic. Saito thought in slight admiration.

...I guess it is something to be proud about.

"By the way, did you tend to me all this time?"

"Oh no, not me. It was actually Miss Vallière..."

"Louise did?"

"Yes. She changed all the bandages and wiped the sweat from your face... She didn't sleep one bit, so she must be exhausted."

As she slept, Louise's breathing was even and gentle. There were heavy dark circles under her eyes though.

Her sleeping face is always so adorable. It's so doll-like.

*So she **can** be nice sometimes,* he thought. Suddenly her side profile looked intensely cuter.

Louise's eyes flickered open.

"Fuaaaaaaaaa~~"

She made a great big yawning stretch, and then her gaze fell upon Saito, who was sitting on the bed blinking in surprise.

"Ara. You're awake."

"Y-Yeah..."

Saito cast his eyes downward. He figured he should thank her.

"Um, Louise."

"What?"

"Thanks. And I'm sorry I made you worry."

Louise stood up.

And drew closer to Saito.

Saito's heartbeat accelerated.

Is she going to say something like "good job, you were really cool out there" and maybe kiss me?

But that was not to be.

Louise pulled away Saito's blanket and grabbed him by the scruff.

"If you're better now, get out of my bed!"

Still holding him by the scruff, Louise pulled Saito out of the bed.

"Wah! Ow!"

Saito tumbled to the floor.

"Hey, I'm still an injured person!"

"If you're well enough to complain, you're well enough for anything else."

Saito stood up. His body still objected, but it was nothing he couldn't put up with. Still, she could've let him sleep for a little bit longer.

"Uh, in that case, I will take my leave now..."

Siesta left the room wearing a crooked smile. Or more precisely, she fled the room.

Louise threw a mountain of clothes and underwear at Saito.

"Ack!"

"That's the laundry that's piled up while you were asleep. Once you're done with that, clean up the room. Hop to it!"

"Um, you know..."

Louise glared fiercely at Saito.

"What? Just with something like beating Guiche, did you think you'd be treated differently? Did you think you'd be congratulated? Are you an idiot?"

Saito looked resentfully at Louise.

He decided to take back his earlier thought about her being cute.

Still... the way Louise sat on her bed swinging her legs was an undeniable level of cuteness beyond this world.

Her long strawberry blonde hair rippled. Her hazel eyes twinkled with mischief. She was rude, arrogant, and selfish, but try as he might to deny it, her appearance was enchanting.

Raising a finger triumphantly, Louise declared.

"Don't you forget! You're my familiar!"

Gandálfr

Chapter One: A Familiar's Day

It had been a week since Saito started his life as Louise's familiar at Tristain Magic Academy. If one were to explain an average day for Saito, it would read like the following:

First, like the majority of animals and humans in Tristain, he woke up in the morning. His bed was, as usual, the floor, though compared to the first day it had mostly improved. Finding that his body hurt all night if he slept on the hard floor, Saito had asked the maid Siesta for some of the hay that was fed to the horses and had packed it into a corner of the room. Saito slept on the pile of hay, wrapped in the blanket that Louise had so "graciously" bestowed upon him.

Louise called Saito's makeshift bed "the chicken's nest," which was appropriate as chickens slept on hay, and as the first thing Saito did every morning was to wake Louise up, like a rooster.

But he had to, because there would be trouble for him if Louise woke up first.

"A stupid familiar that has to be woken by its master needs to be punished." Louise never forgot to remind him.

If Saito ever overslept, he'd be denied breakfast.

Once woken up, Louise got changed. She put on her underwear by herself, but made Saito dress her in her uniform. This was mentioned before. With her enchanting looks, Saito was breathless every time he saw Louise in her underwear. They say you get used to a beautiful lover in three days, but it didn't seem Saito would get used to Louise anytime soon.

Maybe because he was her familiar, not her lover. Still, always by Louise's side, he essentially was one. The only difference was in her attitude and treatment of him.

Getting to see Louise like this every day wasn't all bad. However, it was a

persistent wound to his pride. When helping Louise into her shoes, for example, he couldn't hide the irritation from his face.

At least that much was tolerated, but if Saito ever said anything to set Louise off, things became bothersome.

"A rude familiar that displeases its master this early in the morning needs to be punished," was another of Louise's mottos.

If Saito ever teased Louise about her breast size, or got pouty and said something like, "Do up the buttons yourself," he'd be denied breakfast.

Dressed in her uniform, which consisted of a black cloak, a white blouse, and a grey pleated skirt, Louise then washed her face and brushed her teeth. The room didn't even have sensible things like running water installed, so Saito had to go down to the fountain and bring up water for Louise's use in a bucket. And, of course, Louise didn't wash her face herself. She made Saito do it.

One morning, while he was wiping her face with a towel, he lightly traced Louise's face with a piece of charcoal he had found.

Seeing his masterwork drawn on Louise's face, Saito barely held in a snigger. Then in mock obsequience, he politely bowed his head to Louise.

"Mistress. You are the epitome of beauty this day."

Due to low blood pressure, Louise could only manage a sleepy reply.

"...Are you plotting something?"

"Myself? I am simply a familiar serving the orders of my mistress. I would not dare to plot!"

Louise was suspicious of Saito's sudden and excessive politeness, but since she was almost late for class, she didn't question him any further.

With her vividly rosy cheeks, charming hazel eyes, and lips that seemed carved from fine coral, Louise knew she didn't need to decorate herself, so she didn't wear any kind of make-up. In other words, this meant she didn't look in the mirror much. And this day was no different. The result: she had absolutely no

idea of the "make-up" that Saito had applied on her.

Louise headed out to class in that state. The time being what it was, she didn't encounter anyone in the hallways or stairs.

Louise opened the classroom door panting. As one, her classmates looked at her and exploded with laughter.

"Hey, looking good, Louise!"

"Oh my god! That's **so** you!"

Afterwards, when Mister Colbert kindly complimented the stylish glasses and moustache sketched on her face, Louise went berserk. She went out into the hallway where Saito was holding his stomach as he rolled on the floor in hysteric laughter, slapped him a dozen times, and cut his meals for the entire day.

According to Louise, a familiar that treated its master's face like a piece of canvas was akin to the demons of old that opposed the Founder Brimir and his many allied gods, and such demons were not worthy of the bread and soup granted by the Lady Queen.

* * *

After breakfast, Saito cleaned Louise's room. This involved sweeping the floor with a broom and wiping the table and windows with a cloth.

And then there was the oh-so-enjoyable laundry. He took the laundry down to the fountain and scrubbed it clean against a washboard. There was no warm water, only icy cold water that bit fiercely at his fingers. Louise's underwear were all expensive looking pieces with lots of lace and frills attached. He would get a meal cut if he happened to damage one, so he had to wash them gently. It was painful work. Tired of it all, he left one particular pair with a slightly torn elastic band in the pile one day. Merely a few days later, Louise walked out obliviously wearing that particular pair, when the elastic snapped entirely. Her panties slid down to her ankles, entangling both of Louise's legs like a trapper's snare.

It just so happened that she was at the top of a staircase, so she tumbled spectacularly down them.

Most fortunately, there wasn't anyone else around to see her roll down the stairs with her lower half shamefully exposed, so at least her reputation was spared. Realizing that it had been overkill, Saito was careful not to peek inside her skirt as he apologized profusely to Louise, who lay unconscious at the staircase landing. He hadn't meant for the joke to derail like this. Ideally, he had envisioned it happening in a hallway for optimum embarrassment.

Once Louise regained consciousness and realized what had happened, she thrust the torn pair of panties accusingly at Saito, who was sitting subserviently by the bedside.

"There was a torn pair."

"Indeed there was, Mistress."

Louise's voice quavered with fury.

"Explain yourself."

"It must have been the fountain water, Mistress. Why, it's so cold it could freeze fingers right off. I believe the elastic couldn't endure that."

Saito replied curtly.

"So you're saying it's the elastic's fault?"

"I'm saying it's the water's fault. It was bad water. I'm convinced that there must be some kind of curse on it to make it cold and also affect the elastic somehow."

"In that case, I should not feed such a loyal familiar soup made from that kind of bad water."

"Most gracious of you."

"Three days should do, I think, for the water to return to normal."

Saito had his meals cut for three days.

* * *

However, Saito remained completely fine for those three days. He'd just pretend to be withering and visit the kitchen behind the Hall of Alviss, where the energetic and lovely Siesta would serve him food like stew, and meat on the bone. He went there even when his meals weren't cut. The soup that Louise declared "The Widespread Blessing of Her Majesty, the Queen" was never enough of a blessing to fill him up.

Naturally, he kept his visits to the kitchen a secret from Louise. She was adamant about not giving him more until he had corrected his behavior, so there would be trouble if she found out about the meat and stew Siesta kindly provided him with. Louise would surely forbid him visiting for the sake of "educating" her familiar.

Currently though, she was totally unaware. In any case, Saito preferred Siesta and the kitchen a hundred times more than some Lady Queen and Founder Brimir he'd never met.

* * *

One morning, after hungrily drinking down his soup in front of Louise, he went to the kitchen. Saito, having beaten the noble Guiche at the Vestri Courts, was hugely popular there.

"'Our Sword' is here!"

The one who called out was Marteau, the head chef, a well-rounded man well into his forties. Naturally, he was also a commoner himself, but with his position of head chef at the Academy, he earned as much as a lower class noble, a fact he could be proud of.

Dressed in simple but fine clothes, he commanded the kitchen with a wave and a flourish of his hand.

Despite his highly respectable position as head chef of a magic academy for nobles, Marteau wasn't the least bit arrogant, and surprisingly enough, disliked both magic and nobles.

He called Saito, who had used a sword to defeat Guiche, by the nickname "Our Sword" and treated the boy like a king. Thanks to him, the kitchen was an oasis to Saito.

Saito sat down at his chair, and with a smile, Siesta promptly brought him a bowl of warm stew and soft white bread.

"Thanks."

"Today's stew is extra special,"

Siesta declared, looking particularly happy. Saito curiously lifted a spoonful to his mouth and his face instantly lit up.

"Wow, this is delicious! It's worlds apart from that gruel I get!"

At this, Marteau approached the table holding a kitchen knife in one hand.

"Well of course. That stew's the same stuff we serve to the noble kids."

"I can't believe this is the kind of stuff they get to eat everyday..."

Marteau snorted loudly at Saito's comment.

"Hmph! Sure, they can use magic. Making pots and pans and castles from dirt, conjuring up unbelievable gems, even controlling dragons - so what! But see, creating such exquisite dishes like this is a kind of magic itself. Wouldn't you agree, Saito?"

Saito nodded.

"Absolutely."

"A fine fellow! You're a good man!"

He put an arm around Saito's shoulders.

"Here, "Our Sword"! Let me place a kiss upon your forehead! Come on! I insist!"

"I'd rather you not. And stop calling me that," Saito said.

"Why not?"

"It's just... weird."

The man let go of Saito and spread his arms out in protest.

"But you cut a mage's golem to pieces! Don't you get it?"

"I suppose."

"Say, just where did you learn to use a sword? Tell me where I can go to learn how to swing a sword like that."

Marteau stared earnestly at Saito. He asked the same thing every time Saito came to eat, and Saito's answer was the same every time.

"I don't know. I've never held a sword before. My body just moved by itself."

"You guys! Did you hear that?!"

He yelled, his voice echoing around the kitchen.

The younger cooks and the apprentices shouted back.

"We hear you, boss!"

"This is what they call a true master! They never boast about their skill! Look and learn! A true master never boasts!"

The cooks chanted happily.

"A true master never boasts!"

Then Marteau turned back around to face Saito.

"You know, "Our Sword," I'm starting to like you more and more. So how about

it?"

"Um, how about what...?"

He was simply telling the truth, but Marteau always thought he was just being modest. It was somewhat frustrating. He felt like he was deceiving the good-natured man. Saito's gaze dropped down to the runes on his left hand.

Since that day, it hasn't glowed anymore. Just what was that, I wonder... Even when Saito tried to make a point of staring at his own runes, Marteau interpreted that as him being reserved.

The chef turned to Siesta.

"Siesta!"

"Yes?"

Siesta, who had been cheerfully watching the two of them get along, responded brightly.

"Bring our hero here some of Albion's finest."

Her smile widened, and retrieving a wine bottle of the requested vintage from the rack, she poured some into Saito's glass. Siesta looked on absorbedly as Saito's face grew redder and redder from the wine. These events repeated almost routinely:

Saito visited the kitchen, Marteau became more attached to Saito, and Siesta's respect for him deepened even further.

* * *

Although that particular day... there was a crimson shadow spying on Saito from a window of the kitchen. One of the young cooks took notice of it.

"Hey, there's something outside the window."

The shadow gave a garbled 'kyuru kyuru' and slinked away.

* * *

Then, after breakfast, cleaning, and laundry, he accompanied Louise to class. Originally, he was made to sit on the floor, but after Louise realized he had become rather transfixed with peering up other girls' skirts, she reluctantly let him sit on a chair. And she made it clear to Saito that should his vision ever stray too far from the blackboard, he would be denied lunch.

In the beginning, the lessons fascinated Saito with their marvels: turning water into wine, combining various reagents to brew special potions, materializing fireballs out of nothing, levitating boxes and sticks and balls out of the class windows for their familiars to fetch, etc... but after a while, the novelty wore off.

And so he took to napping instead. The professor and Louise would give Saito evil looks every once in a while, but there were no rules forbidding familiars from sleeping during lessons. And just looking around the class, all the nocturnal familiars were snoozing away, even someone's owl. In fact, if they were to wake Saito up, it would mean that they were acknowledging him as a human. Louise chewed her lips from the overwhelming desire to give the sleeping Saito a piece of her mind, but she couldn't because doing so would mean contradicting herself about him being nothing more than a familiar.

* * *

That same day, bathed in sunlight, Saito was fast asleep during another lesson.

The wine he drank that morning was taking effect, and Saito dreamed.

It was quite an unbelievable dream.

A dream in which Louise crept into his hay pile at night as he was sleeping.

"What's wrong, Louise...?"

At hearing her name being called, Louise shot a glare at Saito.

"You can't sleep? Oh, all right... can't be helped. Munya~"

Oh, he's just muttering in his sleep,

she thought, and faced the front again.

"...Munya. H-hey, don't hug me all of a sudden."

Louise's gaze snapped to Saito once more. The other students were starting to take notice of the situation, and perked their ears to listen.

"...Jeez, for the slave driver you are during the day, you're such a sweet little thing in bed."

A trickle of drool ran down from the corner of Saito's mouth as he continued to enjoy his dream.

Louise grabbed his shoulders and shook him vigorously.

"Hey! Just what kind of dream are you having?!"

Her classmates burst out laughing. Malicorne the Windward made a passing comment.

"Oi oi, Louise! Is that the kind of thing you do with your familiar at night? I'm surprised!"

The female students whispered something amongst themselves.

"Wait! This is just some stupid sleep-talk! Ah, jeez! Wake up already!"

"Louise, Louise, you're like a kitten; stop licking me there like that..."

At this, the laughter threatened to burst through the ceiling.

Louise kicked Saito off the chair, violently returning him to reality from his soft and gentle dreamscape.

"Wh-what was that for?!"

"Since when have I ever snuck into your hay pile?!"

Louise crossed her arms and looked down imposingly on Saito.

Saito shook his head profusely, only further amusing the class.

"Saito, explain to these rather rude people that I never take one step out of my own bed during the night."

"That's right, everyone. I was simply dreaming out loud just now. Louise would never do such a thing."

The students turned away disappointedly.

"Isn't it obvious? Like I would ever do something like that! With this thing, no less! This thing! To even think that I would curl up in bed with this lower life form is far beyond being a joke!"

Louise huffed haughtily, averting her gaze upwards.

"But, my dreams often come true."

Saito piped up.

"Indeed! Dreams do have the power to foretell the future, after all!" Someone in the room supplied in agreement.

"My master here, with her personality, probably won't ever find herself a lover."

A vast majority of the students nodded. Louise shot Saito another evil look, but it was too late. Saito was on a roll.

"My poor master gets quite "frustrated" as a result, and instead resorts to slipping into this familiar's humble hay pile."

Louise put her hands on her hips and strongly reprimanded Saito.

"Enough! Close that unclean mouth of yours right now!"

That didn't stop Saito from continuing either.

"When she does, I have to fend her off a bit..."

By this point, he was too far gone. Louise's shoulders began to tremble angrily.

"And tell her, 'this isn't where you sleep.'"

The class applauded. Saito mimicked an elegant bow and went to sit back down.

Louise kicked him away, sending him rolling across the floor.

"Don't kick me!"

But Louise was beyond the point of reasoning. Her gaze was fixed firmly forward, and as always, her shoulders shook with barely contained fury,

Once again, there was a crimson shadow watching Saito.

It was Kirche's salamander. With its belly to the floor, it stared at Saito through the gap in the row of chairs.

"Hm?"

Noticing it, Saito waved his hand at it.

"You're Kirche's salamander, aren't you? I know you have a name. What was it... Oh yeah, it's Flame. Flame-"

Saito motioned for it to come closer, but the salamander flicked its tail around and spat out a few embers before running back to its master.

"Why would a lizard be so interested in me?"

Saito tilted his head in puzzlement.

* * *

And while Saito was having a staring contest with a salamander during class...

At the Headmaster's Office, Miss Longueville the secretary was busily writing away at something.

She stopped writing for a moment and glanced over at the sequoia desk at which Sir Osmond was busy taking a nap.

The corner of Miss Longueville's lips rose in a faint smirk, an expression she had never shown anyone before.

She stood up from her desk.

In a low voice, she murmured the incantation for a Spell of Tranquility. Dampening her footsteps so as not to wake Osmond, she crept out of the office.

Her destination was the treasury, located on the floor directly below the Headmaster's Office.

Stepping off the stairs, she confronted enormous iron doors. They were kept shut with a thick bolt mechanism, which in turn was secured with an equally large padlock.

This place was where artifacts dating from even before the Academy's establishment were contained. After cautiously surveying her surroundings, Miss Longueville withdrew her wand from a pocket. It was about the length of a pencil, but with a flick of the wrist, it extended to the length of an conductor's baton, which she whirled expertly.

Miss Longueville cast another spell.

Once the invocation was complete, she pointed the baton at the padlock.

However... nothing happened.

"Well, it's not like I really expected a Spell of Unbinding to work anyway."

Smiling deviously, she began reciting the words to one of her specialty spells.

It was a Transmutation spell. Chanting loud and clear, she waved her baton at the heavy lock. The magic cascaded over it... but even after a considerable wait, there was no visible change.

"Looks like it's been magically reinforced by a Square-class mage," she muttered.

A Spell of Reinforcement was one that prevented the oxidation and decomposition of matter. Any substance that had this spell cast on it was protected from any chemical reactions, and allowed it to be preserved forever in that state. Even transmutation magic would have no effect against something protected like this. Only if one's magical skill surpassed that of the mage who cast the spell could it be overcome.

As it was, the mage who had enchanted this door was apparently an extremely powerful mage, considering that not even Miss Longueville, an expert in Earth magic and transmutation in particular, was able to affect the door.

Taking off her glasses, she stared at the door once more. At this point, she heard footsteps coming up the staircase.

She shrunk down her baton and slipped it back into her pocket.

The person who appeared was Colbert.

"Greetings, Miss Longueville. What are you doing here?"

"Mister Colbert, I was going to catalog the contents of the treasury, but..."

"Oh, that's quite some work. It'd probably take you all day to go over each and every item. There's a lot of junk mixed together with them, and it's a rather cramped space they've been arranged in too."

"Indeed."

"Why don't you just borrow the key from Old Osmond?"

The woman smiled.

"Well... I didn't want to disturb his sleep. In any case, I'm in no immediate hurry to complete the catalog..."

"I see. Sleep, you say. That old man, I mean, Old Osmond, is quite a deep sleeper. It seems I shall have to visit him another time."

Mister Colbert began to walk off, but paused in his tracks, and turned around.

"Err... Miss Longueville?"

"Is something the matter?"

Colbert looked slightly embarrassed as he opened his mouth to speak.

"If it would be all right, how would you like to, say... join me for lunch?"

She took a moment to consider, then smiled brightly as she accepted the offer.

"Sure, it would be my pleasure."

The two of them headed down the stairs.

"Hey, Mister Colbert."

In slightly informal tones, Miss Longueville struck up conversation again.

"Y-yes? What is it?"

Emboldened by how easily his invitation had been taken up, Colbert responded quite eagerly to her.

"Is anything important actually inside the treasury?"

"There is."

"Then, do you know of the 'Staff of Destruction'?"

"Ah, that is quite a curiously shaped item, indeed."

Her eyes glinted.

"What... kind of shape?"

"It's extremely difficult to describe, except as simply strange, yes. But never mind that, what would you like to eat? Today's menu is flounder baked in herbs... but I'm quite well-acquainted with Marteau the head chef, and I can have him make any of the world's finest delica--"

"Ahem."

Miss Longueville interrupted Colbert's babbling.

"Y-yes?"

"I must say, the treasury is quite amazingly built. No matter what kind of magic is tried, it would be impossible to open, I assume?"

"That's quite right. It's impossible for just any one mage. After all, it was devised by a group of Square-class mages to resist all spells."

"I'm very impressed that you're so knowledgeable about this, Mister Colbert."

She regarded him with a comfortable expression.

"Eh? Well... Haha, I just happened to come across a lot of documents pertaining to this floor, that's all... I like to consider it a part of my research, haha. Thanks to that, I'm still single at this age... yes."

"I'm sure the woman that you find will be very happy to be with you. After all, you can teach her so much about things that nobody else knows..."

Miss Longueville fixed him with a fascinated look.

"Oh, no! Please don't tease me like that!"

Colbert flustered nervously as he wiped sweat from his balding forehead. Then, regaining composure, he faced her seriously.

"Miss Longueville. Have you heard of the Ball of Frigg[6] that is being held on the day of Yule?"

"No, I haven't."

"Haha, I guess it's because you've only been in Tristain for two months. Well, it's nothing spectacular, just a party of sorts. However, it's said that a couple who dances at this ball will be destined to be together or something like that. It's just a petty legend of course! Yes!"

"So?"

Smiling, she pressed him to continue.

"So... if it would be all right, I was wondering if you would dance with me, yes."

"I would love to. While ball parties are fabulous, I'd like to know more about the treasury right now. I'm quite fascinated by magical items, you see."

Wanting to further impress Miss Longueville, Colbert racked his brains.
Treasury, treasury, she says...

Remembering something she might find interesting, he put on an important air and started to talk.

"Ah yes, there's one thing I can tell you. Although it's not particularly important..."

"By all means, do tell."

"Certainly, the treasury is invincible against magical attacks, but I believe it has one fatal weakness."

"Oh, that's intriguing."

"That weakness is... physical force."

"Physical force?"

"Yes! For example, well, not that this is ever likely, but a giant golem could--"

"A giant golem?"

Colbert stated his opinion quite proudly to Miss Longueville. And once he was done talking, she couldn't help but smile in satisfaction.

"That was most intriguing indeed, Mister Colbert."

Chapter Two: Kirche the Ardent

The night after Saito thoroughly shamed Louise in class with his sleep-talking, Louise unceremoniously threw his pile of hay into the hallway.

“What are you doing?”

“It'd be a bother if I snuck into your bed again, right?”

It seemed she was still upset over what happened earlier in class. “But it's kind of cold outside the room with the wind blowing around.”

“Well, no doubt I'll come and warm you in your dreams,” said Louise, arching her shapely eyebrows. What a bitter girl. She looked determined to make Saito sleep out in the hallway no matter what.

He took his blanket and went out to the hallway. The moment he left the room, the door locked with a loud click. Wind rushed in from the open window, making Saito shiver.

Muttering about the cold, Saito wrapped the blanket around himself and lay down on the hay. The chill of the stone floor seeped into his body. *No heaters either. I'm freezing.*

Making me suffer like this just because of a dream! Saito kicked Louise's door. Of course, there was no response.

Saito began plotting his revenge. *Cutting the elastic in her panties is no longer enough.* As he lay shivering in his blanket wondering how he would get one back on that little girl...

The door to Kirche’s room opened.

Her salamander Flame crawled out, with its burning tail emitting a warm glow. The two stared at each other. The salamander shuffled closer to Saito, who

unconsciously began to back away.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

"Kyurukyuru," it growled comfortingly. It looked harmless before it clamped its jaws on Saito’s sleeve, shaking its head as if asking him to follow it.

“Hey, let go! You’ll light my blanket on fire!” said Saito to an insistent Flame, which only pulled harder.

Kirche’s room remained open. *Is it trying to drag me in there?* Indeed it was. *I don't think Flame is dragging me for the fun of it. What could Kirche possibly want from me?* Saito brainstormed the reasons. *Maybe she just wants to lecture me about quarreling with Louise.* As if in a trance, Saito stepped into Kirche’s room.

* * *

The room was pitch dark, save for Flame’s mild glow. Kirche’s voice commanded from the darkness, “Close the door.” Saito obliged.

“Welcome to my room.”

“It’s pretty dark in here.”

He heard Kirche snap her fingers. Starting from the one nearest him, lamps lit up one by one towards Kirche like lights floating above a street.

Doused in the mild glow, Kirche sat on her bed, with a look of worry on her face. She was wearing attractive underwear, or rather, just plain underwear. One thing was for sure: supported only by her sexy bra, her full breasts were the size of cantaloupes.

“Don’t just stand there. Come to me.” Kirche cooed with her most captivating voice.

Saito shakily wandered to a smiling Kirche, as if in a dream.

“Sit down.”

Saito sat by her side as he was told. His mind was filled with Kirche’s nearly nude body.

“Wh-what is it?” Saito asked nervously. Kirche merely stared at him while slowly waving her fiery red hair. Under the faint lamp light, Kirche’s brown skin looked wildly erotic, as if trying to capture Saito to do her bidding.

Kirche made a long sigh, and worriedly shook her head.

“You must think me a lowly, despicable woman.”

“Kirche?”

“To be thought so is inevitable. Do you understand? My runic name is ‘Ardent’.”

“I know that.”

That cleavage in her bra’s gaps is so sexy...

“My lust is as flammable as hay... that’s why I suddenly called you here. Don’t you get it? Isn’t this really bad of me?”

“That is indeed very bad.” Saito seemed unsure and just played along. He never had a foreign girl speak her heart out to him like this, so he was rather nervous.

“But... I’m sure you’ll forgive me.”

Kirche looked at Saito with moist, watery eyes. Any man would show his most primitive instincts after looking at those eyes.

“For-forgive what?”

Kirche suddenly clasped Saito’s hand, enveloping them with her warm palms before slowly caressing through every finger, sending sparks through his spine.

“Loving you, my dear. To you, my love is that sudden.”

“Yeah, that’s sudden all right!” Saito’s mind was a mess. *She must be joking.* Despite that thought, Kirche’s face looked serious.

“Your grandeur in defeating Guiche was... just... so cool... like a hero of the legends. Me... when I saw you right that moment I was in love. Can you believe it? I was attracted to you just like that! Passion! Oh, this is a passionate love!”

“Pa-passion, huh? Uh...”

“My runic name, ‘Ardent’, is quite passionate too. I’ve been writing love songs since that day! Love songs! Just for you... Saito. You appear in my dreams every night, so I told Flame to see how you’re doing... oh, I’m so embarrassed. You must think that too, am I right? But it’s all because of you!”

Saito just sat there, at a complete loss of words.

Kirche took his silence as acceptance, and slowly, with closed eyes, approached Saito with her lips. *So sexy. I mean... Louise is attractive too. But when it comes to sexiness, she is no match for Kirche. Though Louise is really cute, that part of her is just skin deep.*

However, Saito pushed Kirche’s shoulders away. He felt like something bad would happen otherwise.

Kirche looked at Saito with surprise, as if asking “Why?”. Saito looked away from her body.

“W-well... from what you said...”

“Hmm?”

“You... fall in love too easily.” Saito stuttered, hitting Kirche’s weak point. Her face turned red in an instant.

“Yeah... I guess I have more... passion than others. That can’t be helped. Love is sudden, and it burns my body so quickly...”

At that moment, a voice from outside the window interrupted her.

A beautiful playboy looked inside indignantly.

“Kirche... I came to check because you weren’t there on time...”

“Berisson! We’ll meet two hours later then!”

“That wasn’t what we agreed on!” They were on the third floor. *It looks like this Berisson guy is floating on air with some magic spell.*

Kirche nonchalantly took out her wand from between her breasts, and waved it without even looking at him. Flame shot out from a nearby lamp and flew into the gentleman at the window like a snake.

“What an annoying owl.”

Saito watched in shock.

“Eh... you didn’t hear all that, did you?”

“Uh... who was that?”

“Just a friend. Whatever... right now, my deepest, most passionate love is you, Saito...”

Kirche approached him with her lips again. Saito did not move a muscle, as an irresistible desire invaded him.

At that moment, they were interrupted again.

A sharp-looking man peered into the room with a sad face.

“Kirche! Who is that guy? Aren’t you going to heat up the night with me?”

“Styx! How does four hours later sound?”

“Who is that guy, Kirche?”

This Styx guy was getting mad, and as he was about to enter the room, Kirche waved her wand again. The fire flew from the lamp again, hit the man, and sent him to the ground.

“.....I take that he’s your friend too?”

“Instead of ‘friend’, lets just say that I’ve only heard of him. Oh well, I don’t want to waste our time. Whoever said ‘the night is long’ didn’t know how quickly the sun rises.”

Kirche drew near Saito again. And again, a groan came from the window. Saito impatiently turned around.

Three men looked inside, and said the same thing at the same time.

“Kirche! Who the hell is this?! You said you don’t have any lovers!”

“Manican! Ajax! Gimli!”

Oh wow... five completely different people showed up. Saito was impressed.

“Well... six hours later then,” Kirche waved irritably.

“That’s the morning!!!” the three said in unison.

“Flame.” Kirche casually ordered her salamander, who was sleeping in the corner. Flame sent a blaze towards the three men at the window, and they fell to the ground together.

“And those are...?”

“Them? I don’t even know them. But, most of all, I love you!”

Kirche held Saito’s face with her hands and went straight for his lips.

“N...nhhhh...”

Saito panicked. Kirche’s kiss felt not disgusting, but full of passion. Saito did not resist her from pinning him to the bed.

At that moment...

This time it was the door. Somebody kicked it open.

Saito thought it was just another guy. He was dead wrong. Wearing her thin pajamas, Louise stood and stared at the two from the doorway.

Kirche mildly eyed Louise, and kept her lips locked with Saito’s.

Louise murderously moved towards Saito and Kirche, knocking down a few lamps in the process. Louise’s hands moved faster than her mouth. More impressively, her legs moved faster than her hands.

“KIRCHE!” Louise howled towards Kirche’s general direction. Kirche acted like she just noticed her presence, and slowly removed herself from Saito, while waving her hand indignantly.

“Don’t you see that we’re kind of busy here, Vallière?”

“Zerbst! Whose familiar do you think you’re touching?”

Saito was at a loss. Louise’s brown eyes glimmered with fiery anger.

Kirche raised her hands above her head. Stuck between the two, Saito only panicked. It seemed that letting the whole situation develop into Kirche kissing him had made Louise extraordinarily angry.

“Love and fire are the Zerbst family’s destiny. It’s a fate that burns in our bodies. It is our lifelong goal to embrace this passionate flame. You should know that.” Kirche shrugged, while Louise shook in anger.

“Come here, Saito.” Louise stared at her familiar.

“Oh? Louise... he is indeed your familiar, but he has his own will too, don’t you think? Please respect his choice.” Kirche said at the side.

“Sh-she’s right! Who I hang out with is my business!” Saito added.

Louise raised her voice. “You... by tomorrow you’ll be run through by magic from at least ten nobles! Is that all right with you?!”

“Oh, no problem with that. Didn’t you see how good he was in the Vestri Court ?”

Louise flapped her right hand. “Hmph... so his swordfighting skills are good, but that doesn’t matter when he’s attacked by fireballs from the back and whirlwinds from the front.”

“No problem! I’ll protect him!” Kirche gave Saito a passionate look.

However, because of Louise’s words, Saito thought it over.

If those guys that just visited us at the window find out about me, maybe they would attack me. Kirche won’t be able to cover me all the time, even if she said she would. That and Kirche changes her mind pretty often. She’ll be bored of protecting me in no time.

After some calm reasoning, Saito reluctantly stood up.

“Aww...are you leaving so soon?” Kirche sadly peered at Saito, with her hair spread to her back, and her twinkling eyes seemed to painfully tear. *Kirche is one addicting beauty... if a girl like her sticks to me, who cares if I get hit with magic left and right?* Saito thought wildly.

“That’s her usual tactic! Don’t be fooled by her.” Louise tugged Saito’s hand, and walked out.

* * *

Back in her room, she closed the door with a deadly silence, and faced Saito. Forcefully biting her lip, she sent him a murderous glare.

“Like some stray dog in heat...” her voice was quivering. Louise’s hands moved faster than her mouth, and her feet moved faster than her hands. Her voice was getting shaky, and anger filled her face.

“W-what now?”

“I almost saw you as a person. Looks like I was wrong.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” *Yeah. See me as a person? Sounds like a lie no matter how I think about it.*

“And you went to wag your tail at that Zerbst witch...” Louise reached into a drawer in her desk for something. A whip.

“Uhh...M-miss...” Saito started to stutter.

“Dogs must be treated like dogs. I’ve been too soft on you.”

“But why the whip?” Saito eyed the whip in Louise’s hand. It was quite well made.

“I’m going far out of my way to use a horse’s whip on you. You’re just a dog.”

“A dog, huh?”

Louise started whipping. Pishi-Pishi-!

“Ow! It hurts! Stop, you idiot!”

“What? How is that girl better? What is so good about her?” Louise yelled and whipped.

Saito noticed an opening, and grabbed Louise’s hands. She struggled, but the strength of the girl was not enough. Saito kept his grip on her wrists, and then she stopped.

“Ahh! Let go, you moron!”

“Are you...” Saito bore into Louise. Brown eyes stared back. Up close, one can see an irresistible face.

Cute. Kirche is a beauty, quite sexy. But Louise is like an empty canvas. Not a single speck of dirt...a clean canvas. It’s just that her character is a bit... No matter how Saito said it, he liked Louise better. His heart started beating in sixteenth notes. *Is she jealous? Does she have a crush on me?* In Saito’s eyes, thinking like this made Louise look even cuter. All things considered, Saito was as weak as Kirche in romance.

“Are you jealous? Do you like me?” said Saito. “Were you angry because I didn’t sleep with you and went off with Kirche doing all that? Oh, I didn’t notice. I am sorry.” He lowered his head, and raised Louise’s chin.

“I think you’re not bad either. Look, when you helped bandage me you were really...”

Louise’s shoulders shivered.

“...I should be going for you because I’m a guy. Tonight, I will sleep on your bed, so you won’t have to go to mine.”

Louise’s right foot suddenly moved like a gust, and shot Saito one between his legs.

“.....ahhh....ohhh.....” Saito went on his knees, his body covered in cold sweat. *Oh...that hurt. I think I’m going to die. That REALLY hurt.*

“Like? Why...would I...like you?” Louise angrily stepped on his head.

“Did...did I get that wrong?”

“Obviously so!” she continued stepping.

“Al-all right...I was wrong...”

Louise sat on a chair, crossing her legs, her breathing still uneven. After fiercely torturing Saito for a while, her mood seemed to slightly improve.

“Sure...you can go out with anybody you choose. But, no matter what, you must

not go out with that woman.”

“W-why?” Saito hopped around as if to minimize the pain.

“First, Kirche isn’t a Tristainian; she’s a noble from neighboring Germania. Just that makes going out with her completely unacceptable. I hate Germanians.”

“How do you expect me to know these things?”

“My house, Vallière, has estates on Germania’s borders, so we’re the first on the field against Germanians the moment any war starts. Even worse, right opposite to us on that border is Kirche’s birthplace.” Louise bit down hard on her teeth. “So basically, the Zerbst family is our sworn enemy.”

“And they call themselves a passionate family.”

“Just a low, unworthy family. Kirche’s great-great-grandfather stole away my great-great-grandfather’s lover! That was around 200 years ago.”

“That’s quite a while ago.”

“Plus, that Zerbst constantly slanders Vallière. My great-great-grandfather’s fiancé was stolen away because of that.”

“Huh?”

“My great-great-grandfather’s! His wife was taken away just like that.”

“Okay, whatever...so basically, this is all because your family lost a lover to Kirche’s family?”

“Not just that. We've lost count of how many family members we've lost from the wars.”

“I’m just a lowly little familiar...it’s not like I’m worth being stolen.”

“No. I will not let Kirche steal a single bird. I’ll shame my ancestors if that happens.” With that, Louise poured a glass of water, and downed it in one gulp. “That is why Kirche’s forbidden.”

“Your ancestors have nothing to do with me.”

“Yes they do! You’re my familiar, right? As long as you eat from the Vallière family, you are to follow my orders.”

“Familiar this, familiar that...” Saito stared discontently at Louise.

“You have a problem with that?”

“No, because I can’t live if I don’t do what you say, so I’ll just have to live with it...” Saito stuck up his lip, and sat on the ground with a thump.

“And I think you should thank me.”

“Thank you for what?”

“If the word that a commoner became Kirche’s lover gets out, do you think you’ll survive?”

Saito remembered the men Kirche shooed away, and blasted like flies to the ground...*if that was me...what would that feel like?* Saito also remembered his fight with Guiche, and a shiver went down his spine.

“...Louise.”

“What?”

“Give me a sword. A sword.” Saito wanted to protect himself.

“Don’t you have one?”

“How would I? The one from last time was Guiche’s.”

Louise crossed her arms. “Are you a swordsman?”

“No...I’ve never held one before.”

“But you looked like a natural in that fight.”

“But still...”

“Hmm...” Louise went into deep thought.

“What?”

“I heard familiars get special powers when the contract is made.”

“Special powers?”

“Yeah...like when a black cat became a familiar...” Louise raised a finger in the air and explained.

“Uh-huh...”

“It gets the ability to talk to people.”

“But I’m not a cat.”

“I know. Thing is...a human as a familiar is something totally unheard of, so it’s not impossible that you can just pick up a sword and use it like a natural.”

“Huh...” *I didn’t just use it like a natural. My body felt light and fast like a feather. Besides, Guiche’s statues were made of bronze. There’s no way you can cut into metal that easily, no matter how skilled a swordsman you are.*

“If it’s that incredible, we should go ask Tristain's Academia.”

“Academia?”

“Yeah. It’s the Royal Court’s magic research agency.”

“What would they do to me for research?”

“Ah... many kinds of experiments. Like... autopsies.”

“You’re kidding me.” Saito stood up. *Human experimentation? No, thanks!*

“If you think that’s disgusting, then don’t spread that ‘using a sword like a master in an instant’ around for no good reason.”

“I got it. We can keep that quiet.” Saito nodded in fear.

“Ah... I get it now...” Louise nodded in understanding.

“Get what?”

“I’ll buy you a sword.”

“Oh?” *Well that was sudden. Louise is always so stingy.*

“You never have enough lives if Kirche has her eyes on you. We brought that on ourselves, so we’ll have to take care of it.” Louise weakly said.

“How rare...”

“What?” Louise stared at Saito.

“I thought you’re such a miser. You even freak out about my food.”

“I can’t let a familiar get used to luxury. It makes for bad habits. If it’s absolutely necessary, I’ll buy it. I’m not a stingy person.” Louise said proudly.

“Huh?!”

“Now that you get it, go to sleep. Tomorrow is the Day of Void, so I’ll take you shopping.”

Oh... so this world has Sundays too. Saito thought as he moved towards the hallway.

“Where are you going?”

“Where? To the hallway.”

“It’s all right. You can sleep in my room. If Kirche grabs you again it will be troublesome.”

Saito looked at Louise. “You really are...”

Louise was about to take her whip again when Saito stopped, dove on his straw bed, and wrapped himself in the blanket. He looked at the inscriptions in his left hand.

By lighting up, this thing helped me defeat Guiche, got Kirche head over heels for me, and got Louise to buy a sword for me. What else is this thing going to

bring me? As he thought, drowsiness attacked him. *What a long day...* as he thought it, Saito fell fast asleep.

Chapter Three: Tristain’s Arms Dealer

Kirche woke up before noon. *Today is the Day of Void.* She looked at her window, and found that all the glass was gone, with burn marks surrounding the frame. Still groggy, she stared at the window for a moment before remembering what happened last night.

“Right… a lot of people came, and I blasted them away.”

She stopped caring about her window entirely after that. She got up and began putting on makeup, while excitedly plotting how she should seduce Saito today. Kirche was a born hunter.

When she was done, she left the room and knocked on Louise’s door. She rested her chin on one hand, hiding her smile. *Saito will open the door, and I'll immediately embrace and kiss him. Oh… what will Louise do when she sees that…* Kirche thought.

And then, right… I can try to eye him outside the room, and maybe he’ll approach me himself. The thought of rejection never entered her mind.

However there was no answer after she had knocked. She tried to open the door but it was locked. Without a second thought, she used an unlocking spell on Louise’s door, and was rewarded with a click. In reality, unlocking spells were forbidden on campus, but Kirche didn’t care. “Passion above all” was the rule of her house.

But the room was empty. The two weren’t there.

Kirche looked around the room. “Still the same… a tasteless room.”

Louise’s backpack wasn't there. Adding that fact with the Day of Void meant they had gone out somewhere. Kirche looked out the window and saw two people on horseback, ready to depart; it was Saito and Louise.

“What? Going out, huh?” Kirche mumbled in annoyance.

After thinking for a while, she quickly left Louise’s room.

Tabitha was in her room, deep in her sea of books. Under her light blue hair and glasses were bright blue eyes that sparkled like the ocean. Tabitha looked four or five years younger than she actually was. She was even a bit shorter than the already short Louise, and her body was quite slim. However, she didn’t care about these things. She was a girl that would rather not care about what people thought of her.

Tabitha loved Days of Void. They're when she could sink into her favorite worlds. In her eyes, everyone else was an intruder in her own little world, giving a melancholic feel to her.

Before long, strong knocks rocked her door. Without standing up, Tabitha simply picked up and waved her staff, which seemed to exceed her height. She cast “Spell of Tranquility”, a wind-type spell. Tabitha was a mage of the wind affinity. “Spell of Tranquility” effectively blocked out those distracting door knocks. Satisfied, she returned to her reading, her expression remaining unchanged throughout the encounter.

Then somebody forcefully broke the door open. Noticing the intruder, Tabitha moved her eyes from her book. It was Kirche. She began babbling about something, but with the silencing magic, none of her words reached Tabitha.

Kirche took away Tabitha’s book, and then grabbed the little reader’s shoulders to make her look at her. Tabitha blankly looked at Kirche, her face unreadable. However, one could see that she had an unwelcoming gaze.

But Kirche was Tabitha’s friend. She would have blown anyone else away with a cyclone. Seeing no other way, Tabitha canceled her magic. As if a lock was opened, Kirche’s voice instantly emerged. “Tabitha! Get ready, we’re going out!”

Tabitha only softly explained to her friend, “Day of Void.” That explanation was enough for Tabitha, who attempted to take her book back from Kirche’s grasp. Kirche stood up and raised the book high in the air, their height difference barring Tabitha from the book.

“Yes, I know how Days of Void are important to you, I really do. But now’s not the time for this talk! I’m in love! It’s love! Do you get it now?” She didn’t, and shook her head. Kirche was propelled by her emotions, but Tabitha was a calm and collected thinker. One can only wonder how such polarized people could be such good friends.

“Right… you won’t move until I explain. Geez… I. AM. IN. LOVE! But that lad is going out with that damn annoying Louise today! I want to go after them, and find out where they’re going! Do you get it *now*?” Tabitha still didn’t, because she still didn’t know why that mattered to her.

“They just left! On horseback! I can’t catch up without your familiar, you know? Please help me at least with that!” Kirche started crying. Tabitha finally nodded. *So that’s why… you need my familiar to catch up.*

“Oh thank you so much… so… let’s hurry up!” Tabitha nodded again. Kirche was her friend, and she couldn’t help it if her friends had their problems that they couldn’t take care of themselves. It was a bit annoying, but she didn’t have a choice. She opened her window, and whistled. The sound of the whistle rang in the azure sky for a moment. She then jumped out of the window.

Those who did not know her would have found it weird, if not alarming. Kirche, however, followed close after Tabitha and jumped out the window without a thought. Just a note – Tabitha’s room was on the fifth floor. She tended to forego the door altogether when she had to go outside since jumping out the window was far quicker for her.

Strong and tough wings spread out to the wind. Then, a wind dragon flew into the air and received its two passengers.

“Your Sylphid is still so awesome no matter how many times I see it!” Kirche grabbed a protruding spine and sighed in admiration. That’s right – Tabitha’s familiar is an infant wind dragon.

The dragon, which got the name of the "Fairies of the Air" from Tabitha, swiftly and perfectly caught the upward draft around the tower, and reached 200 mails in the air in the blink of an eye.

“Where?” Tabitha succinctly asked Kirche.

Kirche immediately cried, “I don’t know… I was panicking.”

Tabitha didn’t mind and commanded her wind dragon, “Two people on horseback. Don’t eat them.” Her dragon made a short grunt, showing understanding. Its blue scales glittered, and its wings flapped strongly to the wind. It flew high in the air, scouring the ground for a horse; a simple task for a wind dragon.

Satisfied that her familiar was doing its job, Tabitha snatched her book back from Kirche’s hands, leaned back against the dragon, and started reading again.

* * *

Meanwhile, Saito and Louise walked briskly on Tristain's city streets, having deposited their campus-loaned horse at the city gate's stables.

Saito's sides ached profusely, it was his first time on a horse, after all. "My sides hurt…" Saito moaned, walking slowly.

Louise glanced at Saito and frowned. "You're useless. You haven't even been on a horse before? Commoners are just…"

"And you're annoying. We've been on that thing for three straight hours!"

"Well… we can't walk our way here now can we?"

Despite the pain, Saito curiously looked around. *White cobblestone roads… feels like a theme park here.* Compared to the Academy, there were far more people in common garb here. On the street side were vendors selling fruit and meat.

Saito's love for exotic places momentarily rose. But this was a weird world. There were people briskly walking and people frantically running. Males and females of all ages walked the streets. This bore no difference with Saito's world, though the streets were a bit narrower.

"A little bit tight here…"

"Tight? This is a really wide street as it is."

"Just this?" *Not even 5 meters wide.* With this many people walking around, every step felt cramped.

"Bourdonné Street, Tristain's widest avenue. The palace is straight ahead." Louise pointed.

"Can we go to the palace, then?"

"What business do we have visiting Her Majesty The Queen?"

"I want to ask her to increase my portion of food."

Louise laughed.

The streets were filled with shops. Saito, full of curiosity, could not take his eyes off them. When he looked at one weird-shaped frog in a jar on a trader's mat, Louise pulled him by the ear. "Hey, don't walk around corners. There are lots of thieves and pickpockets here. You *are* looking after my wallet in your jacket, right?"

Louise said wallets are for servants to carry, and mercilessly gave that duty to Saito. The wallet was heavily filled with gold coins.

"I am… I am… very carefully, too. How can anyone steal something that heavy?"

"With magic, that can be done in a second."

But there was nobody around that looked like a mage. Saito learned how to discern between commoners and mages in the Academy. Mages always had capes on, and they looked really arrogant when they walk. According to Louise, that was a noble's walking stance.

"Aren't they all commoners?"

"Of course. Nobles only take up 10% of the population, and there's no way they will walk in slums like these."

"Why would nobles steal?"

"All nobles are mages, but not all mages are nobles. If for whatever reason a noble is disowned from their family, left the family name on his or her own accord, dropped status to be a mercenary or a criminal… Hey! Are you listening?"

Saito wasn't. He was too fascinated by the street signs.

"What does that bottle-shaped sign say?"

"Brewery."

"And what does that sign with a big cross say?"

"It's a recruiting center for guards."

Saito stopped at every meaningful sign, and Louise had to pull him away by his wrist every time.

“Okay, okay, I understand, you don’t have to be in a hurry like that. Where’s the blacksmith’s shop?”

“Over here. They don't just sell swords though.”

Louise walked into an even narrower road. A revolting stench, coming from piles of trash and other dirty things on the ground, soon hit their noses.

“It’s really dirty here.”

“I told you nobles don’t come here that often.”

At the fourth intersection, Louise stopped and looked around.

“Should be near Peyman’s Potion Shop… I remember it’s around here somewhere…”

She saw a bronze sign and happily cried, “Ah! Found it!”

A sword-shaped sign dangled under it. It looked like this was the arms dealer’s shop. Louise and Saito walked up the stone stops, opened the door, and entered the shop.

Despite the bright daylight outside, the shop was a bit dark inside. A gas lamp flickered. The walls and shelves were filled with unorganized weapons. A detailed suit of armor decorated the room. A man in his fifties smoking a pipe eyed Louise suspiciously. That is, until he saw the pentagram on her golden button. He removed his pipe and said, “My lady! My noble lady! All of my wares here are real and reasonably priced! There’s nothing criminal here!”

“I’ll be your customer.”

“Oh… that’s rather weird… a noble buying a sword! Quite strange.”

“Why is that?”

“Well… priests wave sacred staffs, soldiers wave swords, and nobles wave

wands. Isn't that the rule?"

"Oh, I'm not the one using it. My familiar is."

"Ahh… a familiar that can use a sword, huh?" The shopkeeper spoke in a lively voice, and looked at Saito. "I believe that would be this gentleman over there?"

Louise nodded. By this time, Saito had already been pulled in by the shop's vast collection of swords, periodically making cries of "whoa!" and "this one's awesome!".

Louise ignored Saito, and continued, "I'm not very knowledgeable about swords, so please show me anything that is reasonable."

The shopkeeper jubilantly walked into his warehouse, silently rambling, "Oh, this is too great… I can raise the prices so high with this…" shortly afterwards, he returned with a longsword of about a mail in length. It was a very exquisitely decorated sword. It looked like one could swing it with just one hand. There was even a hand guard on the short handle.

The shopkeeper said as though he just thought of something, "Speaking of which, it seems that nobles like to let their servants bear swords lately. The last time any of them came to pick one from me, they picked this type."

I see… a shiny, glittering sword. Very well-suited for a noble. thought Louise.

"Is that the trend?" Louise asked. The shopkeeper naturally nodded.

"That's right. It seems that there's an increase of thievery on Tristain's city streets lately…"

"Thievery?"

"Yes. Some mage thief that calls himself something like 'Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt,' and I heard he stole a lot of treasures from the nobles. Those nobles are getting really rattled, so they're arming their servants with swords."

Louise had no interest in thieves and focused on the sword instead. It looked like something that would break in an instant. Saito wielded a sword that was a lot bigger last time.

“I’d prefer something bigger and broader.”

“My lady, please forgive my bluntness – swords and people have compatibilities, just like men and women. As I look at it, this sword fits my noble lady’s familiar very well.”

“Didn’t I say I want something bigger and broader?” said Louise, impatiently lowering her head. The shopkeeper went inside again, remembering to silently mumble, “Oh, the laymen…” After a while, he returned, one hand rubbing the new specimen with an oily rag.

“What about this one?” It was a splendid broadsword of around a mail and a half in length. The handle was made for two-handed wielding and was lavishly decorated with jewels. A mirror-like blade reflected light with an irresistible glow. Anyone could look at it and say it was a very sharp and broad blade. “This is the best thing I have. Rather than say it’s for nobles, it’s more like something nobles *wish* they can wear on their waists, but that’s something reserved for very strong men. If not, wearing it on the back isn’t half bad.”

Saito walked closer, his eyes staring at the sword. “Awesome. That sword looks really powerful.” Saito instantly wanted it. It was a magnificent sword no matter how he looked at it. *I guess this one’s fine.*…Louise thought, seeing Saito’s satisfaction.

“How much?” she asked.

“Well… it’s made by the famous Germanian alchemist Lord Shupei. It can cut through metal like butter because of the magic infused in it! See this inscription here?” The shopkeeper proudly pointed at the words on the handle. “You can’t get this cheaper anywhere else.”

“Well… I’m a noble.” Louise held her head up high.

At that, the shopkeeper bluntly gave the price, “Two thousand écus, or three thousand new gold coins.”

“What?! You can buy a holiday home with a garden with that!” Louise said, shocked. Saito, with no idea of the currency’s value, stood dumbly.

“A famous sword is worth as much as a castle, my lady. A holiday home is quite

cheap compared to this."

"…I only brought 100 new gold coins…" Louise, being a noble, had little skill in bargaining, and made the taboo of giving away her wallet's contents. The shopkeeper only waved his hand dismissively. "Come on… even standard broadswords cost at least 200 new gold coins." Louise's face turned red. *I didn't even know swords cost that much.*

"What… we can't buy this?" Saito said in a disappointed tone.

"Yeah… we'll have to go for something more affordable."

"Nobles are always so arrogant, and now…" Saito mumbled. At that, Louise stared at him.

"Do you have any idea how much potions cost, because *somebody* got himself seriously injured?"

"…I'm sorry." Saito lowered his head in embarrassment. He still reluctantly caressed the sword. "But I really like this sword…"

At that moment, a deep, male voice came from a messy pile of swords, "Don't be so prideful, kid."

Louise and Saito looked towards the sound. The shopkeeper held his hands to his head.

"Why don't you look at yourself for a moment? You? Wield *that* sword? Don't make me laugh. You're only fit for a stick!"

"What did you say?" Saito did not take that insult kindly, but there's not a single being in that sound's direction to be angry at. It was just a pile of swords.

"If you get it, then go home. Yes, you! That noble girl over there!"

"How impolite of you!"

Saito slowly approached the sound. "What… there's nobody here!"

"Are your eyes there just for decoration?"

Saito looked behind him. *What? It's actually a sword that's saying it*. It came from a rusty, damaged sword. "A talking sword!" Saito exclaimed.

The shopkeeper suddenly yelled angrily, "Derf! Do not say such impolite things to my customers!"

"Derf?" Saito carefully inspected the sword. It was the same length as that huge broadsword, though its blade was slightly less broad. It was a thin longsword, although its surface was coated with rust, and one cannot say it was well made to any degree.

"Customer? A customer that can't wield a sword? You've got to be kidding me."

"Could it be… that this is a sentient sword?" asked Louise.

"That's right, lady. It's a sentient, magical, intelligent sword. I wonder what kind of mage could make a sword speak… but it's got a rotten tongue, always arguing with my customers. Hey, Derf! Keep up the insolence and I'll ask this noble here to melt you!"

"Sounds good to me! I'd like to see you try it! I'm kinda tired of this world. I'd love to be melted down!"

"Fine! Then I'll melt you down!" The shopkeeper approached. But Saito stopped him.

"That's just so wasteful… isn't a speaking sword rather important?" Saito stared at it. "You're called Derf, right?"

"Wrong! It's Derflinger-sama! Remember that!"

"Just like a person, it even has a real name." Saito muttered.

"My name is Saito Hiraga. Nice to meet you."

The sword fell silent, and it seemed to closely observe Saito. After a while, it silently spoke. "So you came… are you a user?"

"A user?"

“Hmm… you don’t even know your true powers, huh? What… oh well! Buy me, my friend!”

“All right. I’ll buy you,” said Saito. The sword went silent again.

“Louise, I’ll take this.”

Louise reluctantly said, “Oh… you want *this* thing? You can’t pick anything prettier that *doesn't* talk?”

“You don’t like this one? I think a speaking sword’s pretty cool.”

“See… that’s why I don’t like it.” Louise complained. But she didn’t have enough for anything else, so she asked the shopkeeper, “how much for this one?”

“Eh… 100 will do.”

“Isn’t that a bit cheap?”

“For that one? I’ll let you take it for cheap.” He waved his hand dismissively.

Saito took out Louise’s wallet from his jacket pocket, and poured its contents onto the counter. One by one, gold coins dropped onto the wooden surface. After careful counting, the shopkeeper finally nodded. “Thank you for your business!” the shopkeeper said as he sheathed the sword and gave it to Saito. “If it gets noisy, just shove it back in the scabbard, and it’ll shut up.”

Saito nodded, and received Derflinger.

Two figures watched Louise and Saito leave the weapons shop – Kirche and Tabitha. Kirche watched the two from the shadows of the streets, fiercely biting her lip. “Louise the Zero… trying to warm your relationship with Saito with a sword, huh? Striking out with gifts so quickly after finding out he’s my prey? What the heck?” Kirche stamped the ground in anger. Tabitha, her job done, was reading as usual. Sylphid circled around the skies above them. They had followed the two here soon after they'd spotted them.

Kirche waited for them to walk far away, and immediately ran into the weapons shop. The shopkeeper stared at Kirche as if he couldn’t believe it. “Whoa… another noble? What the hell is going on today?”

“Hey there, boss…” Kirche played with her hair, a charming smile in her lips. The shopkeeper’s face turned deep red under the sudden seduction.

“Do you happen to know what that noble bought not long ago?”

“A s-sword… she bought a sword.”

“I see… so she *did* get him a sword… what kind of sword?”

“A d-dirty and rusty one.”

“Rusty? Why?”

“Because she didn’t bring enough money.”

Kirche laughed, her hand to her chin. “She went broke! Vallière! Your Duke’s house will cry for this!”

“Uh… is my lady here to buy a sword, too?” The shopkeeper perked up, not willing to let go of the chance. *This noble looks racked and rich compared to that tiny one.*

“Hmm… show me your best.”

The man walked inside, brushing his hands in excitement. He returned, of course, with the broadsword he just showed to Saito.

“Ahh… a very well-made sword!”

“You have a good eye, my lady. That noble not so long ago had a servant that really wanted this one, but it’s too much for them.”

“Is that so?” *The noble’s servant? So Saito wants this!*

“Of course… this sword *is* made by the famous Germanian alchemist Lord Shupei after all. It can cut through metal like butter because of the magic infused in it! See this inscription here?” The shopkeeper repeated what he had said before.

Kirche nodded. “How much?”

The shopkeeper asked for more, seeing how Kirche looked a lot richer, “Hmm… for new gold coins, 4500.”

“Hmm… that’s a bit pricey.” Kirche frowned.

“Well… great swords need to be paid for their worth, you know?”

Kirche thought for a while, slowly moving her body towards the shopkeeper. “Boss… isn’t this just a bit expensive?” Upon being caressed at the throat, the salesman suddenly lost his breath. Temptations hit his mind.

“Uh… but… great swords are…”

Kirche sat on the counter, raising her left thigh. “Isn’t the price a bit *too high*?” She slowly raised her left foot onto the counter. The salesman’s eyes irresistibly stared at her thighs.

“Th-that’s right… then… 4000 new gold…”

Kirche raised her thigh further so that he could *almost* see in between them.

“Ah… nonono, 3000 would do…”

“It’s getting hot in here…” Kirche ignored him, only opening her shirt’s buttons. “I feel really hot in here. Help me take off my shirt, please…” She threw her most attractive expression at him.

“Ah… I got it wrong, I got it wrong… it’s 2500!”

Kirche took off one button, and looked up at the shopkeeper.

“1800! 1800’s fine!”

Another button, exposing her cleavage. She looked at him again.

“Hey, 1600 will do!”

Kirche stopped with her buttons, and turned her attention to her skirt instead, raising it just so little. The man looked like he could not take any more.

“How does 1000 sound?” she suggested, slowly lifting her skirt more. He looked

like he was about to hyperventilate.

And then she stopped. His rapid breathing turned to a sorrowful moan.

“Oh… ohhhhh…”

Kirche straightened herself out, and asked again, “1000.”

“Oh! 1000 will be fine!”

Kirche stepped down from the counter, quickly wrote a check, and slapped it on the counter. “Bought!” She then picked up the sword and left the shop, leaving the salesman to stare at her check.

After a moment, he suddenly regained consciousness, holding his head. “DAMMIT! I SOLD THAT BABY FOR JUST 1000?!” He took a bottle of liquor from his cabinet. “Ohh… I’m done for today…”

Chapter Four: Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt

In Tristain, there was a mage thief by the name of "The Crumbling Dirt," who had every noble in the country cowering in fear. This one's full name was Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt.

When Fouquet heard that a noble in the North had a jeweled crown, he would go all the way there to steal it. When Fouquet heard that a noble in the South had a staff bestowed by the king as a family treasure, he broke through walls to steal it. In the East, none of the best pearl rings by the artisans of the White Islands remained in any mansion. Fouquet also eagerly took possession of a priceless bottle of well-aged wine from a winery in the West. The thief was everywhere.

Fouquet's tactics range from stealthy infiltration to outright breaking in. The national bank had been attacked in broad daylight, and houses were silently frequented in the depth of night. In any case, Fouquet's tactics simply left the royal mage guards in the dust.

Fouquet was identified only by the use of alchemy to enter targeted rooms, turning doors and walls to dirt and sand, then walking through the gaping holes. The nobles were not stupid, of course, they had tried to magically “solidify” everything around their treasure in an attempt to stop the alchemy, but Fouquet's magic was simply too strong, nullifying everything, fortified or not, into dirt.

If Fouquet decided on breaking the way in, a 30-mail tall dirt golem was used. Tossing aside mage guards and shattering castle walls, it let him boldly take prizes in broad daylight.

No one had ever seen Fouquet’s appearance up close. Nobody even knew for sure whether he was a man or a woman. All they knew is that Fouquet was an earth mage of at least Triangle class, that he left insulting notes, such as “I got your treasure. –-Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt” at every robbery scene, and that he preferred treasures and artifacts of great magical power.

* * *

Two huge moons shone down on the walls outside the fifth floor of the Academy of Magic, which encased a treasure room. The light stretched out a shadow, standing straight against the walls. Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt.

Fouquet's green, long hair moved with the wind, and Fouquet briskly stood, openly showing the figure that strikes fear in all the nobles of the country.

Pressing a foot against the wall, Fouquet felt the wall's power and could not help but admire it. *The main tower of the Academy is as strong as it looks… is a physical attack really its only weakness? I can't break through something this thick without attracting attention.* It was not hard for an expert in earth magic like Fouquet to check a wall's thickness with their feet, but breaking a wall was completely different. *It looks like they used only hardening spells on it, but I can't even break this with a golem. It's got a very strong hardening spell… my alchemy won't do much.*

"Damn it… and I already got this far." The thief's teeth grit in frustration. "I'm not leaving the Staff of Destruction, no matter what." Fouquet crossed his arms and went into deep concentration.

* * *

Meanwhile, as Fouquet thought in annoyance about the wall, Louise's room was in chaos. Louise and Kirche glared at each other in anger, while Saito, on his straw bed, excitedly studied the sword Kirche had just presented to him. Tabitha nonchalantly read on Louise's bed.

Louise had her arms on her waist. "What is the meaning of this, Zerbst?" She glared at her rival.

Kirche watched Saito's admiration, "I told you, I got what Saito wanted, so I came here to give it to him."

"Ah, that's a shame. I already got my familiar a weapon. Right, Saito?"

On the contrary, Saito couldn't let go of Kirche's gift. He unsheathed the sword

and stared at it. When he held a sword, the inscriptions in his left hand glowed, while his body became light as a feather. He wanted to swing it around, but he was indoors. He still couldn't figure out what the deal about his left hand was. All he knew is that it glowed if he held a sword.

But all he cared about at this moment was this beautifully decorated blade.

"This is so awesome… I still like this one more… and it shines!"

Louise kicked him into the air.

"What are you doing?!" Saito yelled.

"Give that back. Don't you already have that talking sword?"

"Uh… that's true… it's interesting that a sword can speak, but still…" *It's so rusty and old and so broken. If a swordsman uses anything, it's got to be shiny and cool, right? Besides, Kirche just gave me this for free…*

"Jealous words are quite unmannerly, Vallière!" Kirche trumpeted triumphantly.

"Jealous? Who's jealous?"

"Aren't you? I, Kirche, easily got Saito's most desired sword as a gift. You can't say you're not jealous, can you?"

"Jealous, my arse! That aside, I will not accept even a tiny little bit of generosity from a Zerbst! That's all there is!"

Kirche looked at Saito, who stared reluctantly at the decorated sword in Louise's hands.

"You see that? Saito loves this sword, got it? This sword is created by Germania's very own alchemist Lord Shupei!" Kirche threw a seductive glare to Saito. "You listen here… all that is good under the sun, let it be swords or women, can only come from Germania! Tristainian women, like Louise, are all extremely jealous, impatient, miserly, and snobbish, and nothing can change them!"

Louise glared at Kirche.

“What? I’m just telling the truth.”

“Oh… how… amusing. Women like you are all romantic-minded idiots! Did you hook up with too many guys back in Germania, making nobody trust you, and ending up dropping out and running all the way over here to Tristain?” retorted Louise with a cold, uncompromising laugh, interspersed with angry shivers.

“You have guts, Vallière…” Kirche’s face darkened.

“What? I’m just telling the truth.” Added Louise victoriously,

They simultaneously brandished their wands.

Tabitha flicked her staff even faster than the two, blowing their wands away in a gust.

“Indoors,” she simply announced.

Probably meaning it’s dangerous to fight in here.

Louise angrily muttered, “And who is this? She has been sitting on my bed since-”

“She’s my friend,” countered Kirche.

“And why is your friend in my room?”

Kirche stared. “Is that a problem?”

“Hmmph.”

Saito tried to talk with Tabitha, but she never replied, only quietly reading her book, as if conversations were really inconvenient.

Meanwhile, Louise and Kirche still glared at each other.

Kirche looked away, “Well… let's have Saito decide.”

“Me? Decide?” Saito immediately felt distressed for being singled out.

“Right. This is about your choice of swords.” Louise also looked at him.

Suddenly Saito felt worse. He liked Kirche’s shiny blade the most, hands down. *But Louise will never let me pick that, or she might not let me have dinner for a week, although I guess I can get that from Siesta, but still…*

He looked at Louise, who glared at him. *Louise may be a selfish, self-centered, ungrateful girl, but she did take care of me when I was out for days… and she is the type of girl I find attractive…*

Then again… Kirche bought me this really expensive sword. To top that, a beautiful one like her actually confessed to me. Before this, there was simply no way for me to land someone this striking …

Okay, that just made this impossibly hard. Now it just feels like I’m picking between the two of them and not the sword.

“Well? Which is it?” Kirche and Louise both stared at him.

“Uh, well… can’t I have both?” Saito tilted his head and tried to look cute.

It didn’t work. He was launched into the air by a combined kick, hurling him onto his straw bed.

“Hey.” Kirche turned to Louise.

“What?”

“Guess it’s time to get this over with.”

“Hmm… you’re right.”

“I really hate you, you know?”

“Same to you.”

“We think quite alike.” Kirche smiled and raised a brow.

Louise, too, defiantly stuck her chin up.

“Let’s duel!” They shouted in unison.

“Geez… you don’t have to…” Saito was shocked. The two glared at each other as if they did not hear him.

“But of course, we have to do this with magic!” Kirche triumphantly declared.

Louise bit her lower lip, and nodded. “Fine. Location?”

“Really? Are you sure, Louise the Zero? Are you really sure you want to fight me in a magical duel?” Kirche goaded.

Louise lowered her head. *Am I sure? Of course… not.* But it was a challenge from a Zerbst, so she had to take it. “Of course! I will not lose to you!”

Meanwhile, standing on the walls of the central academy tower, Fouquet felt footsteps. He jumped off towards the ground, and just as Fouquet reached it, he whispered “Spell of Levitation”, landing like a feather, absorbing his momentum. Fouquet then disappeared into the courtyard bushes.

Entering the courtyard were Louise, Kirche, Tabitha, and Saito.

“All right, let's begin.” Kirche announced.

“Are you guys really going to duel?” Saito anxiously asked.

“Yes, we are.” Louise confidently answered.

“Isn’t it a bit… dangerous? Let's just stop here and let it go, shall we?”

“That’s true, so whoever gets injured is the idiot,” said Kirche.

“Uh-huh.” Louise nodded.

Tabitha approached Kirche, and whispered something in her ear. Then she pointed at Saito.

“Hmm… now that’s a good idea!” Kirche grinned.

Then, Kirche whispered something to Louise.

“Ah… not bad.” Louise nodded.

And they both looked at Saito. He suddenly had a bad feeling about it.

* * *

“Hey… are you guys serious?” begged Saito, but nobody cared.

He was hung in midair by a rope from the main tower. *Yep… I should have just picked a girl and been done with it.* On the ground which looked so far, far away, he could see the silhouettes of Kirche and Louise. Despite it being the middle of the night, the two moons made for clear vision. He could even see Tabitha on her wind dragon. It held two swords in its mouth.

The two moons shone warmly on Saito.

Kirche and Louise looked upon him, dangling and flopping around in midair.

Kirche rolled up her fists. “Here’s how we do it… the first to cut off the rope and let Saito down wins. Then the winner’s sword goes to Saito. Sounds good?”

“Got it.” Louise nodded, her face blank.

“No limits on type of spells used. You can go first… my treat.”

“All right.”

“Okay… good luck.”

Louise brandished her wand. In the air, Tabitha began to shake the rope, wobbling Saito left and right. Spells like “fireball” have high accuracy rates, and as long as the target doesn’t move i can hit it. However, Louise had more than that to worry about – she had to make the spell work in the first place.

Louise thought hard. *What would work? Wind? Fire? Water and earth are both out… they don’t have many spells that can cut ropes. Fire spells work the best here.*…and here Louise remembered that that is exactly what Kirche is good at.

Kirche’s fireballs will cut that rope easily. I can’t fail this one.

She picked fireballs anyway. Aiming a small one at the target, she recited the short spell. If she failed, Saito would get Kirche's sword, and to someone esteemed like Louise, this would be completely unacceptable. She finished reciting, and with her utmost concentration, flicked her wand. If it worked, a fireball would come out of the tip.

But nothing came out of the wand. The next moment, the wall behind Saito exploded. The shock wave shook Saito even harder. "What the hell?! Are you trying to kill me?!" Saito's angry yell drifted down towards them.

The rope remained intact. If she thought she could use the shock wave to break the rope, she wasn't thinking. A large crack appeared on the wall.

Kirche collapsed in laughter. "ZERO! ZERO LOUISE! You broke the wall instead of the rope! Now that's *talent*!"

Louise looked down.

"Really, I've got to ask you… what the heck did you do to make it blow up like that?! Oh god… my sides hurt…"

Louise frustratingly held her fists and knelt to the ground.

"Next is my turn." Kirche aimed at the rope like a hunter would his prey. Tabitha was shaking the rope, so it was tough aiming. Despite that, Kirche kept a brisk, easy smile. Chanting a short spell, Kirche waved her wand born out from habit, fire spells were her specialty after all.

From her wand appeared a melon-sized fireball, which flew towards Saito striking the rope, and burned it loose in an instant. Saito started to fall to the ground, but Tabitha waved her staff from the rooftop, casting a Spell of Levitation on him, causing him to slowly land on the ground.

"I win, Vallière!" Kirche announced in earnest.

Louise sat down, pulling on the grass with her hands in despair.

Meanwhile, Fouquet watched them from the bushes. The thief saw the crack on the walls from Louise's blast. *What kind of magic is that? She asked for a fireball spell, but nothing came out of her wand, and the wall blew up. I've never*

heard of a spell that can make things explode like this. Fouquet shook his head. *More importantly, I can't let go of this chance.* Fouquet started chanting a long spell, waving his wand at the ground. When finished, a mild smile formed on his face. Following Fouquet's voice, a bulge formed on the ground. Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt was showing his talent.

"What a shame, Vallière!" Kirche laughed.

Her battle lost, Louise reluctantly and gloomily slacked her shoulders. Saito watched her, a complicated emotion on his face. "…why don't you uh… untie me first?" He managed a low tone. He couldn't move with the rope wrapped around him in layers.

Kirche smiled, "Oh, why of course, I'll be glad to!"

Right then, Kirche felt something behind her. She turned around. She couldn't believe her eyes. "What… what the heck is this?!" Her jaw dropped. What she saw was a huge earth golem moving towards them.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!" Kirche ran away screaming.

Saito yelled behind her, "Hey! Hey! Don't go! Don't leave me here!" He was in a panic. After all, he had never seen such an enormous golem, and it was heading towards him. "Wh…what the hell is this?! It's huge!" Saito wanted to run, but the ropes had him tight on the ground.

Louise recovered her senses and ran towards him.

"You… why are you tied up like this?!"

"Isn't that your idea?!"

Above them, the golem raised its foot.

Saito lost hope. "Louise, get out of there!" He yelled.

"Dammit… this rope…" Louise tried in vain to untie the knots.

The golem's foot descended. Saito closed his eyes.

In that instant, Tabitha's wind dragon veered from the skies grabbing the two with its talons and pulled them out from under the foot with only inches to spare, before it came down crushing everything under it in a heartbeat.

Hanging under the wind dragon, Saito and Louise watched the golem. Saito shakily asked, "Wh-wh-what…the hell is that?"

"I'm not sure… but it's one gigantic earth golem! Somebody must have summoned that!"

"Something that big?!"

"…whoever summoned this must be at least a triangle level mage."

Saito bit his lip, and thought of Louise, who tried to untie him despite her danger. "That aside… why didn't you run?"

"No respectable master would desert her familiar like that." She answered frankly.

Saito watched her quietly. For some reason, he found her quite attractive… just now.

Fouquet, standing on the golem's shoulder, smiled and paid no attention to the wind dragon or Kirche escaping. A dark cape covered him from head to toe so they could not make out his face. Fouquet transformed the golem fist to a metallic composition, and ordered it to punch the wall. A dull thump sounded as the metallic fist hit in the wall, collapsing it. Under the dark cape, Fouquet smirked.

The golem transported Fouquet in with its hand, and the thief entered through the hole and into the treasure vault. It stored valuables of every kind, but Fouquet had only one target.

The Staff of Destruction.

A row of staffs of many sorts hung on the wall, but one came to Fouquet as completely unlike a staff. It was a mail long, and made with a sort of metal that he had never seen before. He looked at the metal plate right under it, reading, "Staff of Destruction, do not remove." His smile grew to a grin.

Fouquet picked up the Staff of Destruction, and was shocked by its lightness. *Just what is this thing made of?* He had no time to ponder and ran back onto the golem's shoulder.

Fouquet burned a message onto the wall before leaving: "I have the Staff of Destruction. – Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt."

With its caped summoner sitting on its shoulder, the golem leaped over the Academy walls, landed with a huge thud, and moved toward the grasslands and beyond.

Above the golem, the wind dragon circled around. Tabitha, sitting on the wind dragon, waved her staff for a Spell of Levitation, moving Saito and Louise onto the dragon's back. She waved again. The air around Saito resonated into slicing waves, shredding the binding rope into pieces.

"Thank you," he said to Tabitha in gratitude.

Her face remained blank, only nodding in acceptance.

Saito watched the gigantic earth golem, and asked Louise, "That mage… broke the wall. But what for?"

"The treasure vault." Tabitha answered.

"He was holding something when it came out of that hole."

"It was a thief. But… that was quite bold."

They watched as the giant golem suddenly crumbled in mid-run, into a large mound of dirt.

They descended to the ground.

Brightly illuminated by the moons, there was nothing else besides the mountain of dirt. Just like that, the summoning mage had disappeared into the night.

Chapter Five: The Staff of Destruction

The next morning…

At the Tristain Academy of Magic, there was much commotion from the last night's events, just as though a wasp's nest had been stirred.

Why? Because the Staff of Destruction had been stolen.

And it was brazenly stolen by using an Earth Golem to break through the wall of the vault.

The teachers of the Academy of Magic who gathered inside the vault were speechless when they saw the gaping hole in the wall.

The inscription on the wall etched by Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt said it all:

[I have the Staff of Destruction. – Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt.]

At this point in time, all the teachers at the academy could do was gripe and whine

"It's that thief who had looted the nobles clean, Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt! How daring of him to target the academy!"

"What were the guards doing?"

"Even if the guards are around, they're useless! They're only commoners! Speaking of which, which noble was supposed to be on duty last night?"

Mrs. Chevreuse felt anxious. She was supposed to be on duty last night. "But who would steal from the academy?" she thought while sleeping soundly in her own room instead of being next to the vault door like all nobles on watch duty must do.

One of the teachers immediately pointed out and said, “Mrs. Chevreuse! You were supposed to be on duty last night! Am I right?”

Mrs. Chevreuse broke into tears, ”I’m very sorry… Very sorry…”

“Even if you cried your heart out, would it come back? Or are you going to pay for it?”

“But… but I just finished paying for my house.” Mrs. Chevreuse knelt down on the floor and wept.

Just then, Old Osman arrived. “Erm… This is not the best time to be hard on the ladies, right?”

The fellow teacher who reprimanded Mrs. Chevreuse retorted, “But Osman, Mrs. Chevreuse failed in her duty! She was sleeping soundly in her bed when she was supposed to be on watch!”

Old Osman gently stroke his long beard while looking at the very shaken and stirred teacher.

“Erm… What’s your name again?”

“It’s Gimli! Have you forgotten?”

“Oh, right! Gimli! Well, Mr. Gimli, don’t get angry. Honestly speaking, how many of you here can say that you’re always vigilant throughout your tour of duty?” Old Osman replied.

The teachers looked at each other and hung their heads in shame. There was silence.

“Well, that’s the situation that we’re in now. Talking about responsibility, I think all of us, including myself, have to be held accountable for this incident. Why did we think that a thief could never infiltrate the academy? Is it because of the number of mages we have in the academy here that gives us the assurance that we won’t be attacked? This type of thinking is wrong from the beginning.”

Old Osman gazed at the hole in the wall and continued, “It’s our complacency that has gave Fouquet the courage to trespass, and steal the Staff of Destruction.

We’re all at fault.”

Mrs. Chevreuse looked upon Old Osman with gratitude and said, “Oh! Osman, Mr. Osman! Thank you for your benevolence. From now on I’ll look upon you as though you’re my father.”

“Well, that… Hehe… Miss…” Old Osman started to stroke Mrs. Chevreuse’s bottom.

“If that’s okay with you… It’s up to the headmaster then.”

Old Osman, not wanting to put the blame on anybody, decided that was the best way to loosen the uptight atmosphere. After that he proceeded to clear his throat, with everybody remaining solemn waiting for him to speak.

“Well then, who were the ones who witnessed the theft?” Osman asked.

“It was these three.” said Mr. Colbert while pointing to the three people behind him.

It was Louise, Kirche and Tabitha. Saito was also present but due to the fact that he was a familiar, he wasn't counted as a “person”.

“Oh… It’s you guys…” Osman said as he looked at Saito with great interest.

Saito did not know why he was being stared at, but remained courteous nonetheless.

“Please tell us about the event in depth.”

Louise stepped forward and described what she saw. “Mm… A great clay golem appeared and broke the wall. The hooded magician standing on its shoulder went in and took something… I think it most probably was the Staff of Destruction... After that the hooded mage rode on the golem and escaped beyond the school walls… The golem became a big mound of earth in the end.”

“After that, what happened?”

”Later, all we saw was a mound of earth, with no sign of the hooded mage.”

“So… that is what happened…” Osman said while stroking his beard.

“Even though we wanted to carry on the chase, without any leads we couldn't. So…”

At this point in time Old Osman suddenly remembered a question to ask Mr. Colbert, ”Ah, Where is Miss Longueville?”

“I’m not sure, I haven’t seen her since morning.”

“Where could she have gone to during these trying times?”

“That’s right, where could she be?"

In the midst of those mutterings, Miss Longueville finally appeared.

“Miss Longueville! Where have you been? Something terrible has happened!” said Mr. Colbert anxiously.

Miss Longueville spoke to Old Osman in a very cool and calm manner. “I’m extremely sorry to be late! I was doing some investigations. So…”

“Investigations?”

“Yes. When I woke up this morning there was already a lot of commotion happening, so then I went to the vault and saw the inscription on the wall made by Fouquet. I knew that the thief infamous throughout the land had struck again. Therefore, I immediately started investigations.”

“You’re really very efficient, Miss Longueville.” Mr. Colbert then asked again in an urgent manner, “But in the end, did you find out anything?”

“Yes, I have gotten hold of the whereabouts of Fouquet.”

“What!?” Mr. Colbert spoke with amazement. “Where did you get this information from Miss Longueville?”

“According to the commoners around the area, they saw what seemed to be like a person wearing a black hooded cloak entering an abandoned house in the nearby forest. I think that the person is most probably Fouquet and that

abandoned house is most probably his hideout."

Louise upon hearing that exclaimed, "A black hooded cloak? Unmistakable, that must be Fouquet!"

Old Osman too got psyched up and asked Miss Longueville, "How far is it from here?"

"By foot it takes half a day, by horse it should only take four hours."

"We must report this to the Imperial Court right away! We must seek reinforcements from the imperial army!" Mr. Colbert shouted yet again.

Old Osman shook his head and stared at Colbert and with a vigor unfitting for an old man shouted, "You fool! By the time we report this to the imperial court, Fouquet would have gotten away scot-free! Besides, if we can't even handle such a small problem on our own, we're not fit to be called nobles! Since the staff was stolen from the academy, then it's the academy's responsibility to get back the staff ourselves!"

Miss Longueville smiled, as though she was waiting for this answer all along.

Old Osman coughed for a while, and then started recruiting volunteers. "Now, we're going to organize a search team to find Fouquet. Those willing to join, please raise up your wands."

All of the nobles looked at each other awkwardly, not one raised a wand.

"No one? That's peculiar. No one wants to be known as the hero who caught Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt?"

Louise was among those who lowered their heads but she decided to raise her wand.

"Miss Vallière!" Mrs. Chevreuse exclaimed in surprise. "You mustn't do this! You're still a student! Please leave this to the teachers!"

"But none of you are willing to help…" Louise muttered.

Saito looked at Louise with his mouth wide open. The rather serious look on

Louise coupled with her gently biting her lips looked so stunning that it had captivated Saito.

Seeing that Louise had raised her wand, Kirche too raised her wand, with a little reluctance though.

Mr. Colbert even more surprised, exclaimed; “Miss Zerbst! Aren’t you a student too?”

Kirche replied nonchalantly, ”Well, I simply cannot lose to the Vallière family.”

Seeing Kirche raising her wand, Tabitha did the same.

“Tabitha! You need not do this! This does not concern you at all!” Kirche said.

Tabitha just answered, ”I’m worried.”

Feeling touched, Kirche looked at Tabitha with gratitude.

Louise at the same time also muttered, ”Thank you… Tabitha.”

Seeing the three of them, Old Osman laughed and said, “Well then, it’s all up to you three now.”

“Sir! Headmaster Osman! I strongly object! We must not put the life of a student in danger!”

“Well, would you then go in their stead, Mrs. Chevreuse?”

“Ah... Erm… Well… I’m not feeling very well recently, so…”

“They have seen Fouquet before plus, even though Miss Tabitha here is very young, I have heard that she has already been conferred the title of chevalier, am I right?”

Tabitha did not answer and just stood quietly.

All the teachers looked at Tabitha in astonishment.

“Is that true, Tabitha?” asked Kirche in similar astonishment.

Even though chevalier is the lowest title that the Imperial family can confer to a person, Kirche was still amazed that Tabitha could attain it at such a young age. If it’s a title of “Baron” or even “Marquis”, the titles could be obtained by purchasing large amounts of land. However for a person to be called a chevalier, the only way is to render great service for the country. It’s a title that can only be conferred by merit.

Once again, there was great commotion inside the vault.

Old Osman went on and looked at Kirche and said, ”Miss Zerbst from Germania comes from a family of distinguished war heroes, and she herself has a very strong background in fire magic."

Kirche flicked her hair with confidence.

Louise, thinking that it was time for her to be praised too, cutely stood to attention.

Old Osman was now in a pinch. There was almost nothing to praise about Louise…

“Ahem!” Clearing his throat, Osman veered his sight clear of Louise and said; ”That... Miss Vallière comes from the prestigious Vallière Family, a family renowned for their mages. And… She’ll be a promising one in the future… and as for her familiar…”

Placing his gaze on Saito, Osman continued saying; ”Even though he’s a commoner, he has defeated General Gramont’s son, Guiche de Gramont in battle." Old Osman thought to himself: and if he really is the legendary Gandálfr… "Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt should not be a match for him."

Mr. Colbert also enthusiastically added; “Yes! Yes! Because he is the legendary Gand…”

Old Osman hastily covered Mr. Colbert’s mouth before he could finish his sentence. “A.. Hahaha… He’s talking nonsense! Haha!...”

Then there was silence again.

Then Headmaster Osman in a solemn tone spoke, “If anyone thinks that they're

more capable than the mentioned three, please step forward.”

No one stepped forward.

Therefore Old Osman turned to the group of four and said, ”The academy awaits the capture of Fouquet then!”

Louise, Kirche and Tabitha stood to attention and said, ”We swear upon our wands to capture Fouquet!”

After that they pulled the edges of their skirts and made a curtsy. Saito also hastily followed. As he wasn't wearing a skirt, he pulled the end of his jacket.

“Well then, ready the carriage and set off right away. You must conserve your energy before you reach your destination.”

“Miss Longueville, could you go with them, too?”

“Yes, Headmaster Old Osman. I had wanted to go with them as well,” said Miss Longueville.

* * *

So under the lead of Miss Longueville, the four quickly set off.

Even though it was considered a carriage, in actual fact it was just a cart with wooden planks attached as a seat. The good thing about it though was that if they were attacked, they could easily jump out of the carriage right way.

Miss Longueville was in charge of driving the carriage.

Kirche asked the silent Longueville who was concentrating on the reins, “Miss Longueville, this type of job could be done by a commoner. Why do you have to do it yourself?”

Miss Longueville smiled and answered; “It’s all right. I’m not a noble anyway.”

Kirche paused for a while, and asked again, “But aren’t you Headmaster

Osman’s secretary?”

“Yes, I am. But Old Osman isn’t a person who is concerned by a person’s status when looking for help. Whether if he’s a noble or commoner.”

“If it’s possible, tell me in depth how you lost your status, please.”

But Miss Longueville just smiled at Kirche. It seemed like she did not want to speak anymore.

“Just tell me please, even if it’s just a little.” Kirche pestered as she began leaning closer to Miss Longueville. Just then she felt someone grabbing her shoulder. It was Louise. Kirche then turned around and said, “What is it that you want, Vallière?”

“Forget it. Stop raking up someone’s past.”

“Humph, I’m bored, that’s why I needed some one to talk to”. Kirche replied while placing her hands behind her head and laying against the side of the carriage.

“I do not know if this applies to your country, but in Tristain, it’s a shameful act to force someone to reveal something that he or she does not want to say.”

Kirche did not answer her. She got up and sat in a cross legged position and began saying, “It’s all because of your impetuousness that I got into this mess. Capturing Fouquet…”

Louise gave an angry stare at Kirche, “What do you mean by that? Didn’t you volunteer yourself in?”

“If you had come alone, wouldn’t Saito be in danger, too? Am I right, Louise the Zero?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Anyways, if that large golem appears again, you would surely run to the rear and let Saito do all the fighting, right?"

“Why would I run away? I would use my magic, you’ll see!”

“You, using magic? What a joke!”

The two started bickering again. Tabitha continued reading her book.

“That’s enough! Would you both please stop it?” Saito interrupted.

Kirche did a gesture and said, “Humph, I’ll stop. I’m not the one at fault anyway.”

Louise bit her lips.

“Well then darling, this is for you.” Kirche looked at Saito seductively, and then placed in his arms the sword that she had bought for him.

“Wow! Thanks!” Saito said while taking the sword.

“I won that time round, or do you have something to say, Louise the Zero?”

Louise stared at the both of them, but kept quiet.

Suddenly, it turned dark. The carriage had entered the forest. The darkness and the weird smell present in the forest sent shivers down their spines.

“We’ll have to walk from here onwards.” Miss Longueville said. The group then disembarked from the carriage, and proceeded to the small path into the forest.

“I’m afraid of the dark and don’t like the feeling around here…” Kirche said while wrapping her arms around Saito’s.

“Could you not keep so close to me?”

“But I’m afraid!” Kirche said with exaggerated reaction. Anyone could tell that she was lying…

Saito, worried about Louise, glanced at her.

Louise turned her head away. “Humph”

The group reached a clearing in the forest. It was roughly the size of the Vestri Court and in the middle was an abandoned house. The house was built from wood with a corroded stove. Next to it was a completely rundown warehouse.

The group hid behind the bushes and observed the house.

Miss Longueville pointed to the house and said, “From the information I’ve gathered, that should be the place.”

“Looks like no one is inside. Is Fouquet really hiding there?”

The group started discussing, using sticks to draw their battle plan on the ground. They all agreed that ambushing him was the best way. All the better if he was sleeping.

Firstly, they would need to scout around the house and find out what is going on inside. After that, if Fouquet is inside, the scout would draw him out, because there is not enough earth inside the house for him to create an earth golem. Once outside, the rest would all cast their magic against him, without letting him have a chance to summon his golem.

“So who is going to lure him out?” Saito asked.

Tabitha replied, “The one with the best reflexes.”

All stared at Saito.

“Me?” Saito sighed. He drew out the sword that Kirche gave to him.

The runes on his left hand started glowing. At the same time Saito felt his body becoming as light as a feather.

Saito moved closer to the house and peered through the window in the house. There was only one room in the whole house, with a table and a reclining chair that were both covered in dust. There was also a bottle of wine on the table and in one corner of the room there was firewood.

There was no one inside and there did not seem to be any place to hide inside the house either.

Had he already left this place?

But their opponent was Fouquet, a triangle mage. So he could still be hiding inside even though there did not seem to be a hiding place.

So Saito decided to call everyone over.

Saito used his hand to make an “X” sign on top of his head, a sign that means the house is empty.

The rest of the group who were hiding carefully approached the house.

“There’s no one inside,” Saito said while pointing at the window.

Tabitha waved her staff at near the door and muttered, “There’s no trap.” She then opened the door and went inside the house.

Kirche and Saito followed suit and entered the house.

Louise told the rest she would stand guard and stayed behind.

Miss Longueville said that she would investigate the area around the forest and disappeared.

Saito’s group went into the house and started to look for any clues to Fouquet's whereabouts.

Then, Tabitha found inside a box... The Staff of Destruction.

“The Staff of Destruction.” Tabitha said while waving it around.

“Isn’t this too easy?” Kirche exclaimed.

Saito looked at the Staff of Destruction and said with astonishment, “Kirche, is this really the Staff of Destruction?”

Kirche nodded and said, “Unmistakably, I saw it once during my tour of the treasure vault.

Saito brought the staff closer and examined it closely. “If I’m not wrong this is a …”

Just then, Louise who was standing guard outside gave a chilling shriek. “Ahhhh!!!”’

“What happened, Louise?!”

Just as everyone looked outside the house, a loud sound could be heard. Crack! Suddenly the house was without a roof and everyone looked up.

In place of the roof was a giant earth golem.

“It’s an earth golem!” Kirche screamed.

Tabitha was the first to react. Waving her staff, she started chanting her magical inscriptions. A whirlwind appeared out of her staff and struck the golem.

After the whirlwind dissipated, the golem remained unscathed.

Following Tabitha, Kirche took out her wand hidden in her cleavage and started chanting.

A fireball shot out of her wand and engulfed the golem. Even though the whole golem was on fire, it did not seem to be affected by the fire at all.

“It’s too tough for the few of us!” Kirche shouted.

“Retreat” Tabitha said softly.

Kirche and Tabitha went different ways and ran out of the house.

Meanwhile, Saito was looking for Louise.

“Over there!”

Louise stood behind the golem, chanted something and pointed her wand towards the golem.

Something exploded on the surface of the golem. It was Louise’s magic! The golem realized this, turned around and faced Louise.

Saito, standing near the door of the house 20 mails away from Louise shouted, “Run! Louise!”

Louise refused, “No! If I subdue this, no one will ever call me Louise the Zero ever again.” Louise appeared to be very serious. The golem tilted its head, pondering whether to deal with Louise or Kirche and Tabitha who were escaping.

“Look at the size difference between you and the golem! You can’t possibly win!”

“You’ll never know if you don’t try.”

“It’s too hard! It’s impossible!”

Louise stared at Saito and said, “Haven’t you said this before?”

“What?”

“When you were badly beaten by Guiche’s Valkyries, when you kept standing up and said, you did not want to lower your head, and you never will.”

“Yes... I did say that… but…”

“I feel the same way. Even though I cannot accomplish anything, this is a matter of pride. If I run away now, people will say, ‘because she’s Louise the Zero, that’s why she ran away’."

“Does it matter? Let people say whatever they want!”

“But I’m a noble. Nobles are people that can use magic.” Louise tightened her grip on her wand. “And nobles never turn their backs on their enemies.”

The golem decided that it would deal with Louise first, it raised its leg, preparing to crush her.

Louise raised her wand towards the golem and started chanting again…

But it failed, even though Louise used ‘fireball’.

Then a small explosion occurred on the golem’s chest and small fragments of earth fell out from its chest. The golem was not affected by the attack at all.

Saito grabbed his sword and dashed towards Louise.

Louise saw the golem’s foot getting nearer and nearer. She closed her eyes and prepared for the worst.

At this instant, Saito approached her at the speed of a whirlwind, grabbed her

and rolled away from the golem’s stomp.

Saito gave a slap on Louise’s face. Pak!

“Do you really wish to die?”

Louise looked at Saito, stunned.

“To hell with your noble’s pride! Once you die, nothing really matters anymore! Idiot!”

Tears began to flow out of Louise’s eyes like a waterfall.

“Please don’t cry!”

“But… but I cannot take this lying down… I’m always being treated like a fool by others…”

Looking at the crying Louise, Saito felt hapless.

Being constantly called “Zero”, being treated like an idiot, no one could take that lying down. He recalled his fight with Guiche. Louise cried that time, too. Even though Louise is stubborn and haughty, in reality she actually hates fighting and she’s not good at it either.

She’s only a girl… Louise’s beautiful face was now covered in tears, just like a crying child.

But this was not the time to console her. Saito turned his head over and saw the golem raising its fists, ready to pound them.

“Can’t you even console me a little?” Louise protested as Saito carried her and escaped.

The golem chased after them, even though the golem was nowhere near agile, its speed was still on par with Saito.

Tabitha's Wind Dragon landed in front of Saito to help in their escape.

“Get on.” Tabitha said.

Saito placed Louise on the dragon’s back.

“You too, quickly!” Tabitha said to Saito with urgency unlike her normal self.

But Saito did not get on, instead he ran towards the golem.

“Saito!” Louise shouted.

“Fly away now!” Saito shouted.

Tabitha stared at Saito emotionlessly for a while, and was forced to make Sylphid fly up as the golem was approaching them.

Bang!

The golem’s fist smashed onto the place Saito stood on. Just in the nick of time, Saito jumped and evaded the blow. The golem removed its fist from the ground and a crater a meter wide was formed.

Saito mumbled to himself, ”Don’t cry if you can’t take it lying down. Stupid! This really makes me feel like doing something for you!” Saito faced the golem and said, “You better not look down on me! You’re just a pile of dirt!”

He grabbed hold on his sword and said, “I’m Louise’s familiar!”

“Saito!” Louise attempted to jump down from Sylphid which was in mid air, but was grabbed by Tabitha.

“Please save Saito!” Louise pleaded.

Tabitha shook her head.

“Impossible to get near.”

Whenever Sylphid tried to get near, the golem would try to attack it. So Tabitha was not able to approach Saito at all.

“Saito!” Louise shouted again.

Louise saw Saito wielding his sword in a stand off against the golem.

The golem moved and threw a punch. In mid-flight the fist morphed into steel.

Saito saw this, and parried the attack with his sword.

Pang! The sword broke from the hilt upon impact.

Saito was stunned. Was this sword really made by the famous Germanian Alchemist Lord Shupei? It's totally useless!

Without a weapon, all Saito could do was evade the golem's attack.

Seeing Saito in a pinch, Louise was desperate. Wasn't there anyway to help him? Just then, Louise noticed the "Staff of Destruction" held by Tabitha.

"Tabitha! Pass that to me!"

She nodded and passed the Staff of Destruction to Louise.

The Staff of Destruction had an unusual shape that Louise had never seen before.

But since Louise's magic did not work, all she could depend on now was the Staff of Destruction.

Louise closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Opening her eyes again she said, "Tabitha! Use levitation on me." And jumped off the Sylphid's back. Tabitha hastily cast "Levitation" on Louise.

Under the effect of the spell, Louise slowly descended and, facing Saito and the golem, waved the Staff of Destruction.

Nothing happened at all. There was no response from the Staff of Destruction.

"Is this really a magical staff?" Louise shouted urgently.

Were there any special requirements in order to activate it?

Saito looked at the descending Louise and was shocked. Why did she come back? It would have been better for her to stay on the dragon!

At the same time, Saito saw the Staff of Destruction that Louise was holding.

Looks like Louise did not know how to use the staff and she was just waving it around…

Saito rushed towards Louise.

If we could use this, maybe we could defeat the golem!

“Saito!” Louise shouted to Saito who was running towards her.

Saito grabbed the Staff of Destruction away from Louise.

“I don’t know how to use this!”

“It’s to be used like this!”

Saito grabbed hold of the Staff of Destruction, took out the arming handle, opened the rear cover and pulled out and extended the inner tube.

… Why do I know how to do this?

But that was not the time to think.

He flipped up the telescope sight on the tube and aimed.

Seeing his proficiency in handling the Staff of Destruction, Louise was too shocked to say anything.

Saito placed the Staff of Destruction on his shoulder and pointed the front of the staff towards the golem.

Due to the short distance between him and the golem, Saito decided to aim directly at the golem.

As the distance was very close, the arming range might not be attained and therefore even if hit directly, it might not explode.

Forget about that, just try it! Saito thought while shouting at Louise, “Don’t stand behind the staff, there will be a back blast!”

Louise hurriedly moved out of the way.

The golem approached closer and closer to Saito.

Saito released the safety latch and fired the weapon.

Immediately, a loud thunder came from the staff and a projectile with wings flew towards the golem.

The projectile met with the golem with a terrific explosion.

Saito instinctively closed his eyes.

A deafening roar occurred and the upper body of the golem pulverized and flew out in all directions, causing a rain of earth.

Saito slowly opened his eyes.

As the smoke from the explosion cleared, only the lower body of the golem was left standing.

What was left, took one last step forward before it finally stopped moving, and knelt down.

Then slowly from the waist, it crumbled… and returned into what it originally was – dirt.

Just like last time, the golem was reduced into a mound of earth.

Louise, who had witnessed everything, felt her legs weaken and sat on the floor.

Kirche, who was hiding near the bushes, came running out.

Saito finally gave a sigh of relief.

Kirche hugged Saito and said, “Saito, My darling! You did it!”

Sylphid, who was carrying Tabitha, descended. Tabitha looked at the mound of earth and asked, “Where is Miss Longueville?”

Everyone realized that Miss Longueville was missing.

Just then she came out from the forest.

“Miss Longueville! Did you find out where Fouquet was controlling the golem from?” Kirche asked.

She shook her head.

The four of them started searching the mound of earth for clues. Saito looked at them, and then looked at the Staff of Destruction, thinking to himself: *Why did this thing appear in this world?*

Just as he was thinking, Miss Longueville took the Staff of Destruction away from Saito.

“Miss Longueville?” said the puzzled Saito.

Miss Longueville widened the distance between the group and then said, “Great job, people!”

“Miss Longueville!” Kirche shouted. “What’s the meaning of this?”

Louise stared at Miss Longueville, too shocked to say anything.

“The one controlling the golem was me all along.”

“What? That means… You’re…”

Miss Longueville removed her glasses, her once gentle expression had changed into one full of killing intent.

“Yes, I am Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt. The Staff of Destruction is really powerful; it actually can defeat my golem in just one hit!”

Fouquet held the Staff of Destruction on her shoulders like Saito did just now.

Tabitha waved her staff and began chanting.

“All of you don’t move! I have the Staff of Destruction pointed towards you. Drop your wands now.”

They had no choice but to obey. Without their wands, they could not cast any magic.

“Mr. Agile Familiar, please drop your broken sword too. You’re a threat to me if you’re holding a weapon.”

Saito obeyed her orders and dropped the sword.

“Why?” Louise asked angrily.

“Hmm… I’d better explain to you all so you can rest in peace.” Fouquet said with a coquettish smile on her face.

“I had gotten hold of the Staff of Destruction, but I did not know how to use it.”

“The way to use it?”

“Yes. No matter how I waved the staff or applied my magic on it, there was no response at all. That frustrated me. After all, if I do not know how to use it, it would be just as useful as a decorative item. Wouldn’t it?”

Louise wanted to dash out towards Fouquet, but was stopped by Saito.

“Saito!”

“Let her finish.”

“How considerate of you, Mr. Familiar. Then I will continue. Since I did not know how to use it, the only way was to let other people show me how to use it.”

“So therefore you brought us here.”

“If it’s the students from the academy, there may be a chance that someone knows how to use the staff.”

“If none of us knew how to use the Staff of Destruction, what would you have done?”

“If that was the case, you all would be crushed by my golem. After that I would bring the next group of students here. But thanks to you, I finally know how to use the Staff of Destruction.”

Fouquet smiled and said, “Even though the time spent with you all was short, I’m really happy. Goodbye.”

Kirche feeling hopeless, closed her eyes.

Tabitha and Louise closed their eyes, too.

But Saito did not.

“You’re really brave.”

“Well, actually it’s not bravery.” Saito replied.

Fouquet pressed the trigger as Saito had done before.

But the magic that happened before did not happen again.

“Huh? Why?” Fouquet pressed the trigger again.

“It has only one shot; it won’t be able to fire again.”

“What do you mean one shot?” Fouquet shouted deliriously.

“Even if I explained, you would not be able to understand. That is not a magical staff from your world.”

“What did you say?” Fouquet dropped the Staff of Destruction and took out her own wand.

Saito moved as fast as lightning, delivering a blow to Fouquet’s stomach with the hilt of his sword.

“This is a weapon from my world. Hmm… To be precise, it’s called an M72 rocket launcher.”

Fouquet fell onto the ground.

Saito then picked up the Staff of Destruction.

“Saito?” Louise and the other two all stared at Saito.

Saito answered, “We’ve caught Fouquet and retrieved the Staff of Destruction.”

Louise, Kirche and Tabitha looked at each other, and then ran towards Saito.

Saito, with mixed feelings, hugged the three of them together.

* * *

Inside the headmaster’s office, Headmaster Osman listened to the group’s account of what happened.

“Hmm… So Miss Longueville is Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt… Because she’s such a beauty I did not think twice about hiring her as my secretary.”

“How did you go about hiring her?” Mr. Colbert who was also present asked.

“In a tavern. I was a customer while she was a waitress there. Where I slowly caressed her from her hands down to her buttocks…”

“Then what happened?” Mr. Colbert asked again.

Headmaster Osman embarrassingly confessed, “Because she wasn’t angry at all after what I did, I asked her whether she wanted to become my secretary or not.”

“Why?” The bewildered Mr. Colbert continued asking.

“Anyways!” Headmaster Osman cried out using vigor unfitting for an old man.

Osman started coughing. And said sedately, “And she could use magic, too.”

“Yeah, magic that could kill.” Mr. Colbert mumbled to himself.

Headmaster Osman coughed again then told Mr. Colbert in a prudent manner, “Come to think of it, the reason that Fouquet allowed me to touch her all over the place, served me wine happily, and praised that I was handsome man, while I was in the tavern, was just to infiltrate the academy. All those praises were most probably just lies…”

Mr. Colbert upon hearing that immediately remembered that he was also bewitched by Fouquet once, and had revealed the weakness of the vault walls to her.

Mr. Colbert decided that he would take that secret with him to his grave.

“Yes. Beautiful women are deadly mages.”

“I couldn’t agree more with you, Colbert.”

Saito, Louise, Kirche and Tabitha stared blankly at the two.

Realizing that the students had given them the cold stare, the embarrassed Osman cleared his throat and regained his solemn composure.

“A job well done for all of you, you have returned the Staff of Destruction and captured Fouquet.”

The three besides Saito acknowledged proudly.

“Fouquet will be handed over to the town guards, and the Staff of Destruction will be returned back to the treasure vault. Finally the case is closed.”

Gently caressing each of the trio's heads, Osman said, “I have requested the imperial court to confer upon you the title of Chevalier, I believe that we should have news of it soon. And since Tabitha already has the title of chevalier, I have requested that she be given the Elven Medallion.”

The trio’s faces brightened up upon hearing the news.

“Really?” Kirche said astoundingly.

“Yes. You have done more than enough to deserve this title. Haven’t you?”

Louise gazed at Saito who was listless since they entered the office.

“Headmaster Osman, Saito… won't get anything?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Because he’s not a noble…”

Saito replied, “I don’t need anything.”

Headmaster Osman gently clapped his hands and said, ”I almost forgot, Tonight’s Ball of Frigg will resume as planned since we have gotten back the Staff of Destruction.

Kirche’s face brightened up. “That’s right. Let’s forget about Fouquet and dance all night long!”

“The main attraction of the ball will be you three. So go get ready and dress up!”

The three bowed, and left through the door.

Louise stopped and looked at Saito.

“You go first.” Saito told Louise.

Even though Louise was still worried, she nodded and left the room.

Osman turned to Saito and said, “You have something to ask me?”

Saito nodded.

“Please ask. I’ll try to answer your question to the best of my abilities. Even though I couldn’t confer you a title, this is the least I can do to show my appreciation.”

Immediately after, he asked Mr. Colbert to leave the room. Mr. Colbert, who had been waiting for Saito to speak, was expressing displeasure as he exited the room.

After Mr. Colbert left, Saito said, “That, the Staff of Destruction was originally from my world.”

Osman’s eyes gleamed. “Originally from your world?”

“I’m not from this world.”

“Is this true?”

“It’s true. I was transported to this world due to Louise’s summoning.”

“I see. If that’s the case…” Osman squinted his eyes.

“The Staff of Destruction was a weapon from my world. Who was the person who brought it to this world?”

Osman sighed and said, ”The one who gave the Staff of Destruction was my savior.”

“Where is the person now? That person is definitely from the same world as me.”

“He died. That was over thirty years ago…”

“What did you say?”

“Thirty years ago, while I was strolling inside the forest, I was attacked by a two headed dragon. The one who saved me was the owner of the Staff of Destruction. He used another Staff of Destruction to kill the two headed dragon and then collapsed. He was already injured at that time. I transported him to the academy and treated his wounds. But to no avail…”

“And he died?”

Headmaster Osman nodded.

“I buried the Staff of Destruction that he had used to save me along with him in his grave, the other one I named the Staff of Destruction and kept it inside the vault in order to commemorate my savior…”

Osman gazed far away and said, ”While he was resting on the bed till the day he died, he kept saying repeatedly ‘Where is this place? I want to go back to my world.’ I guess that he must have been from the same world as yours.”

“Who was the one who brought him to this world then?”

“I don’t know. Right till the end, I still had no idea how he ended up here.”

“Damn it! Just when I thought that I had a clue.” Saito lamented. The clue had led him into a dead end. Osman’s savior was most probably a soldier of *that* country. But how did he end up in this world? Even though Saito wanted to know badly, there was no way to know anymore.

Osman held Saito’s left hand, ”The runes on your hand…”

“Oh yes. I wanted to ask about that, too. Once the runes glow, I can use any weapon proficiently. Not just swords, even the weapons from my world too…”

Osman pondered for a moment and said, “…That I know. That is the runes of “Gandálfr”, the legendary familiar.”

“The runes of the legendary familiar?”

“Yes. Gandálfr was a legendary familiar who could use any weapon at will. That is most likely the reason that you could use the Staff of Destruction.”

Saito was confused. “…Then, why am I the legendary familiar?”

“I don’t know.” Osman quickly replied.

“I’m sorry. But there is a possibility that the runes of Gandálfr are related to you being transported to this world.”

“Haa…” Saito sighed.

Saito thought that he could get the answers that he wanted from the headmaster, but apparently he did not know much either…

“I’m sorry that I could not be of much help. I’ll always be on your side, Gandálfr!” Osman hugged Saito. “I must thank you once again for bringing back the possession of my benefactor.”

“It’s all right…” Saito said tiredly.

“I tried to find out for you how you arrived in this world but…”

“But what?”

“But I could not find anything, please do not be dismayed. You’ll get used to this world as time goes by. Maybe by then you could find a wife here too…”

Saito sighed again. The clue to return to his original world slipped through his fingers just like that.

* * *

On top of Alvíss Dining Hall, there was a great hall. That was where the ball was being held. Saito leaned on the railings of the balcony and looked at the grand reception.

The students and teachers who were dressed grandly gathered around tables filled with exquisite food and chatted amongst themselves. Saito arrived there through a flight of stairs leading up to the balcony. Seeing them, Saito felt that he would not fit in at all and therefore, decided not to enter.

Next to Saito were some food and a bottle of wine that Siesta had brought for him earlier. Saito poured for himself a glass of wine and drank it.

“Eh, haven’t you got a drop too much?” said Derflinger which was leaning on the balcony worryingly. As the sword that Kirche gave to Saito broke during the ordeal, Saito brought Derflinger for protection. As usual it had a rotten tongue but it still had a happy go lucky personality so having him for company still had its merits.

“You’re noisy. To think that I had found the way to go back home, in the end it’s just a dream… can’t I drink to drown away my sorrow?”

Just before the ball started Kirche, who was beautifully dressed in an evening gown, was accompanying Saito. But as soon as the ball started she was nowhere to be seen.

Saito had no choice but to use Derflinger as a companion to drive away boredom.

In the middle of the dance floor, Kirche was surrounded by a group of young

males, talking and laughing. Even though Kirche promised to dance with him, it would be quite some time before Saito had his chance.

Tabitha dressed in a black gown feasted away on the sumptuous food on the table.

Looked like everyone was enjoying the dance to the fullest…

The doors to the great hall opened and Louise appeared.

The guards at the door notified everyone on Louise's arrival. "The daughter of Duke of La Vallière, Louise Françoise Le Blanc de La Vallière arrives!"

Saito held his breath. Louise was dressed in a white evening gown with her long, strawberry blonde hair tied up into a pony tail. Her hands were covered by pure white gloves which adorned her grandeur. Her petite face along with her low cut evening gown made her sparkle like a gem.

After confirming that the guest had arrived, the musicians started playing music that was extremely soothing to the ears. All around Louise were males that were captivated by Louise's beauty asking for a dance with her. Before this, no one ever realized Louise's beauty and only thought of her as "Louise the Zero." Now, that same group of males were trying to win her heart.

The nobles started dancing gracefully on the dance floor. Louise turned down everyone's invitation for a dance, saw Saito on the balcony and headed over. Louise stood in front of the slightly drunk Saito and placed her arms on her waist, "Looks like you're enjoying yourself" She said.

"Not really…" Saito moved his gaze away from the dazzling Louise, thinking to himself that it was lucky he had drank some wine, so Louise would not realize that he was blushing.

Derflinger looked at Louise and said, "Haha. Clothes really <u>do</u> make the man!"

"None of your business." Louise stared at the sword and crossed her arms.

"Aren't you going to dance?" Saito asked while avoiding Louise's gaze.

"I have no dance partner." Louise replied.

“Didn’t a lot of people ask you for a dance just now?” Saito asked.

Louise did not answer and extended her hand.

“Huh?”

“Even though you’re just a familiar, I could make an exception.” The blushing Louise said while avoiding Saito’s gaze.

“Don’t you mean ‘Could I have this dance?’?” Saito said while trying to avoid Louise’s gaze too.

After a moment of silence, Louise sighed.

“Only for today!” she said.

Louise then held the ends of her dress and made a curtsy.

“May I have a dance, sir?”

These actions made the bashful Louise look even more cute and alluring than ever before.

Saito, trembling held Louise’s hands and together, they walked towards the dance floor.

“I have never danced before.” Saito said.

“Just follow my rhythm,” Louise said, and then gently held onto Saito’s hand. Saito imitated Louise’s actions and followed her rhythm. Louise did not seem to mind Saito’s stiff actions at all and concentrated on dancing. “Saito, I believe you now,” She said.

“What?”

“…You said that you were from another world,” Louise replied while dancing gracefully.

“Huh? Didn’t you believe me already before that?”

“I originally only took what you said with a pinch of salt… but the Staff of Destruction… It’s a weapon from your world isn’t it? When I saw that, all I could do was to believe,” Louise lowered her head and asked, “Do you wish to go back?”

“Yes. I want to go back, but since there’s no way to go back yet, I’ll have to get used to life here for a while.”

“You’re right…” Louise muttered to herself then continued dancing.

After that, Louise was still blushing and did not dare look at Saito. “Thank you.” She abruptly uttered.

Hearing that, Saito was puzzled. Why is she acting so funny today?

“Well… Didn’t you save me when I was almost crushed by Fouquet’s golem?” Louise replied.

The musicians played an even more encouraging tune. Slowly bit by bit, Saito was cheering up. *Someday… I will be able to finally return back home… but being here isn’t really that bad either.*

Louise is really very dainty today, I should be satisfied.

“You’re welcome. That’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m your familiar.”

Louise smiled.

Derflinger which was still leaning on the balcony looked at the both of them, ”Unbelievable!” it said to itself.

The twin moons in the sky shone onto the dance floor, and along with the candle lights, created a romantic atmosphere on the dance floor.

“Partner! You amaze me!”

Looking at his partner dancing with his master, “A familiar dancing with his Master? That’s the first time I’ve seen this happening!”

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ The term "New Religion" refers to any religious group in Japan that has its roots after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. This includes the Nichiren Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai, as well as the infamous Aum Shinrikyo. The latter probably explains Saito's concern.
2. ↑ Hamburger: In Japan, hamburgers can be served in a bun, called hambāgā (), or just the the patties served without a bun, known as hambāgu () or "hamburg," short for "hamburg steak." The type mentioned by Saito was the version without the bun. ()
3. ↑ Rooms in Japan are measured jō (), which is the number of tatami mats required to cover the floor. A tatami mat is 90 cm by 180 cm for an area of 1.62 m^2 each. Twelve jō is slightly more than 19.5 m^2 or almost 210 square feet.
4. ↑ Alvíss was a dwarf in Norse mythology who was turned to stone through Thor's trickery.
5. ↑ Vestri is a dwarf in Norse mythology representing West.
6. ↑ In Norse mythology, Frigg (Eddas) or Frigga (Gesta Danorum) was said to be "foremost among the goddesses," the wife of Odin, queen of the Æsir, and goddess of the sky.